

Vol. 3

The Wrong Way to Use
Healing Magic

KUROKATA

ONE PEACE BOOKS





Vol. 3

The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic

KUROKATA

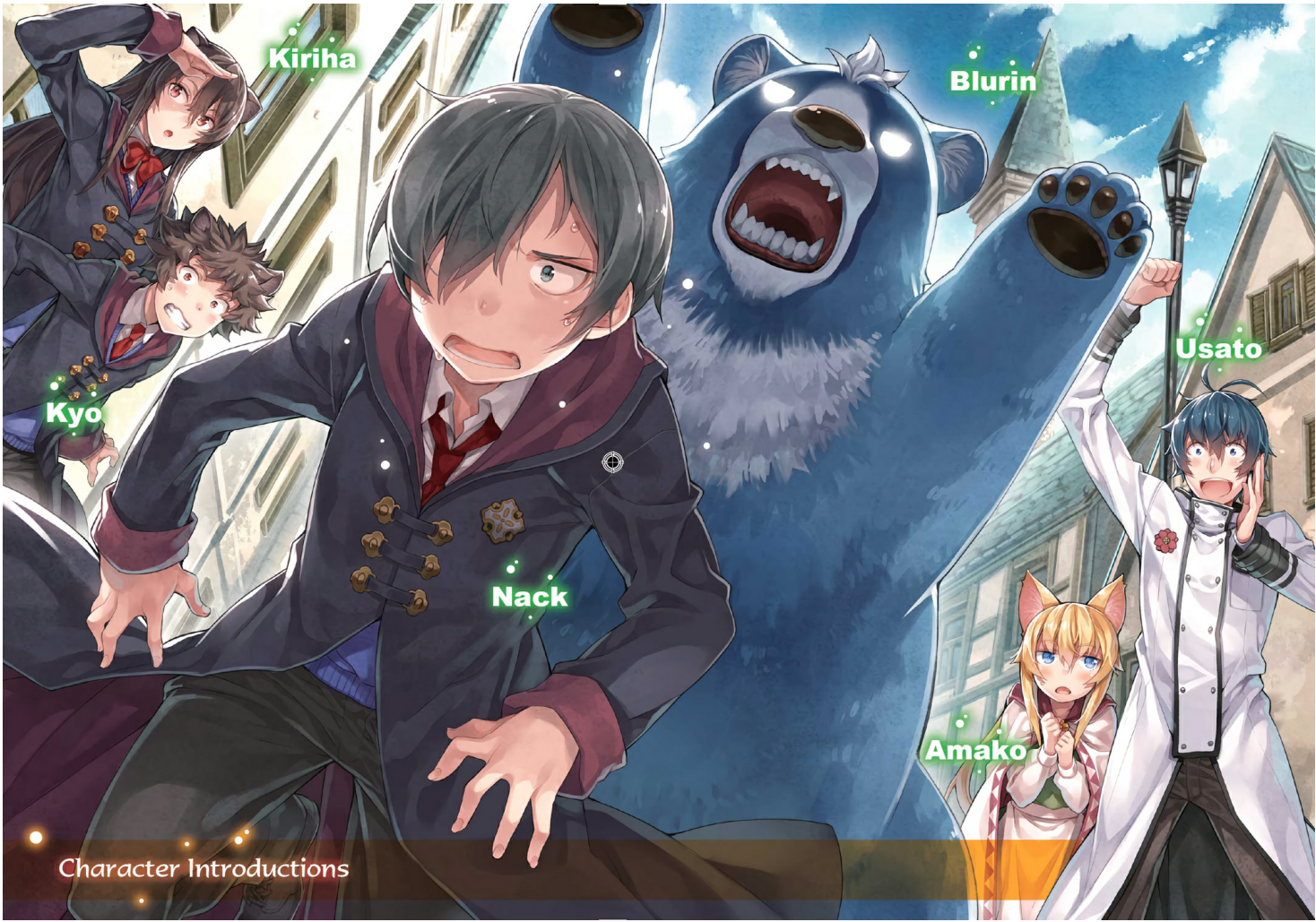
ONE PEACE BOOKS



The Wrong Way to Use
Healing Magic

Vol. 3

KUROKATA





Mina

Halpha

“I will hurt you until you cry
and beg for mercy.
I’ll keep you as my slave
for the rest of your life.
Quite the honor, wouldn’t you say?”

“I apologize for
pushing you into battle . . .
I am only doing my duty.”

The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic

Vol. 3

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	A Chance Encounter with Luqvist's Healer!	007
CHAPTER 2	The School's Strongest! Healing Magic vs. the Magic Eye!	034
CHAPTER 3	Usato Takes a Disciple!	060
CHAPTER 4	Nack's Training Begins!	110
CHAPTER 5	Digging for True Power! Welcome to Hell!	168
CHAPTER 6	Death Match! Nack vs. Mina!	192
CHAPTER 7	The Start of a New Journey!	254
Extra	What the Demon Lord Sees	288

Rescue Team Guidelines: Stance on training

- Rooms will be kept spotless.
- Cleaning is training—give it everything you've got.
- Slackers will be used as mops for punishment.

Chapter 1: A Chance Encounter with Luqvist's Healer!

Our traveling party arrived in the Wizardry City of Luqvist. We were there to deliver a letter informing them of the Demon Lord threat. I was excited to see the place—it was home to a school that raised mages, and its streets were filled with lively students. I even met the city's healer, a young boy.

Unfortunately, I never imagined that meeting him would mean finding him beaten and bullied.

Amako told me before we arrived that Luqvist's healer was tangled up in something he couldn't easily get out of, but it was only now that I grasped what she meant—he wasn't going to be able to help Amako when he already had bullies to contend with.

But who was behind the bullying, and why?

"How . . . ?" I uttered.

I relaxed my hand, which I'd balled into a tight fist, and looked around for answers.

"What happened here?" I asked one of the bystanders.

"Did you only just get here or something? I guess there's no way you could have known," answered a man, looking somewhat shameful as he pointed to the boy in my arms. "He's a plaything for a group of bullies. They put him through this kind of thing all the time because of his healing magic."

A plaything for bullies? Healers aren't mages you can just freely use as sandbags outside of training.

"First things first . . . let's wake him up," I said.

I gently shook the young healer's shoulders. I wanted to make sure he could at least regain his senses. Sometimes people might be unconscious but otherwise uninjured.

After a little shaking, the young healer groaned and began to blink back to consciousness. I was glad that he woke so easily—it meant he was probably fine.

"Looks like you're awake," I said, putting a hand to the boy's shoulder. "How do you . . ."

But as soon as the boy's eyes focused, he quickly brushed my hand away.

"Get away from me!" he shouted.

"Wha?!"

I was shocked by the reaction—by the boy's refusal—and watched as he looked up at the sky and scrambled to his feet in a panic.

"Dammit! I'm going to be late!" he said.

The boy took off running down the main street.

"Huh? Hey! Wait!" I called, but my words fell on deaf ears.

That was no ordinary level of hurry. Wonder if he had something urgent to attend to?

But all the same, I couldn't believe that he snubbed me like that. Was that how bad things were? Was that how low his level of trust was?

"Well, what now?" I muttered.

I hoped that I'd have a chance to meet Luqvist's healer, and my wish was granted. However, the encounter left me ill at ease and a little anxious. I wasn't the sort of person to just jump in whenever I saw a case of bullying, but I

couldn't just dismiss it as nothing either. I probably didn't have the power to change the boy's circumstances, and in this city, as a healer, it seemed like something might end up happening to me.

"Best catch up with senpai first," I said to myself.

I decided asking senpai and Kazuki was the best course of action. It was much better than just getting lost in my own thoughts. The two of them were on the student council—they probably knew more than I did about this kind of thing. With my mind made up, I was just about to take off when I heard voices calling out to me.

"Hey! Usato-kun!"

"Usato!"

I knew those voices. I turned to find a good-looking couple running toward me—Inukami-senpai and Kazuki.

"Lucky. Guess I don't have to go looking for them," I muttered.

Kazuki waved as I walked over. Just as expected, Inukami-senpai was very nonplussed that I'd changed my lodging without telling them.

"Usato-kun! If you're going to stay with Amako's friends, then at least take me with you!"

"Don't get all mad. That would have been impossible. You have no idea what I had to go through yesterday."

And besides, if senpai had been with me, Kyo would have been frustrated beyond belief. I knew he wasn't a bad guy at heart, but I really wanted to establish some kind of baseline of trust between us before I introduced him and Kiriha to senpai.

“Anyway,” I added, “aren’t you guys supposed to be at the lodging?”

“Senpai wanted to go pick you up,” said Kazuki, “so I tagged along. And meeting you here has made things easier.”

“Hm? Easier for what?”

Did the school reply to the letter already? Unlikely. We’ve already been told that the decision will take a considerable amount of time and discussion.

Inukami-senpai seemed to spot the question mark floating above my head, and she walked up to me, overflowing with excitement.

“Last night, Headmistress Gladys invited us to watch some classes at school. I wanted you to be there!”

“Class observations, huh?”

I remembered that Gladys had mentioned something about that yesterday. She must have noticed the sheer thrill on senpai’s face and was kind enough to organize things that same night.

“Yeah, I’m pretty intrigued too, so I’m in,” I said.

“I knew you’d say that! Come on, let’s go!”

Inukami-senpai took Kazuki and me by our hands and took off toward the school.

“Well, as long as you’re happy . . .” I said, breaking into a smile.

“You look pretty excited yourself, Usato,” said Kazuki.

I laughed.

“Guess I can’t hide anything from you.”

I decided that I’d bring up the topic of Luqvist’s healer with them a little later.

I didn't want to kill the mood by holding things up, and besides, it was fun to do stuff with the two of them.

*

Senpai excitedly took us all the way to the entrance of the school of magic. We were standing there, looking around, when Halpha came outside.

"Hello, Halpha," I said as we walked over to him.

"Good morning, Usato. I hear you stayed at a separate lodging last night. I hope everything was alright?"

"Uh, yeah. . . For the time being, anyway."

Halpha looked perplexed. He tilted his head slightly, but I simply responded with a smile—I wasn't about to tell him that the owner of the house I stayed at had chewed me out before outright attacking me.

"Well, I'm glad things seem okay," he said. "Well then, let's get straight into the tour, shall we?"

Fortunately, Halpha didn't seem to think anything else of our interaction, which was a relief. We followed him on a tour of the school and its classes. The school square was entirely deserted—there wasn't a student in sight. I wondered if it was because morning classes were going on. Perhaps there were no students out and about at this time?

"I wonder what sort of things they teach in the classes here . . . What do you think, Usato?" Kazuki asked.

"Hm . . . I guess the focus is on how to use magic and its practical

application?”

I mean, it *was* called the school of magic, after all.

“Yes, we teach that too,” said Halpha, turning to us, “but because many who come here have their sights set on becoming knights and adventurers, students can learn a wide variety of skills, including martial arts.”

I was impressed—it was a system similar to our home world, where a person could choose to study and learn what was most useful for their future. We walked through a school building, chatting as we went, and found ourselves in a hallway with metal plates on wooden doors. Each had something etched into it, written in the language of the world we now called home. Halpha, leading the way, found the door he was looking for, then turned to us.

“They’re currently doing a lesson on basic magic in this room,” he said. “This is the first subject that any student takes when they enroll here to learn magic. Naturally, I took the class also.”

“Basic magic. Welcie taught senpai and me the basics when we arrived,” said Kazuki. “I’m interested to see how the lessons work here.”

How did I learn my magic? All I remember is just endless running . . . But then again, I guess there were those times when Rose shouted at me. “Feel the magic while you run!” Yep, that’s what she said during my training on how to handle magic.

When I thought about it, however, I couldn’t understand how I’d come out of that training with the ability to use my magic.

“Unfortunately,” said Halpha, “this is not the class we’re here to see today. We’re going to visit my class instead.”

“Your class?”

“Indeed. They just so happen to be doing practical training today, and I’d love for you to see it. I was also hoping you might be willing to take part in it too.”

“Are you sure that’s okay?” asked senpai. “We don’t want to interrupt class.”

“Well, the headmistress herself gave us express permission, and I’m the class overseer, which grants me a certain amount of authority.”

“Overseer? Is that like a teacher?” I asked.

“Put simply, yes,” said Halpha with a nod.

Does that mean that Halpha has the same authority as a teacher or instructor? That’s impressive—he looks about the same age as the rest of us.

“How about you, Usato? Will you be taking part?” Halpha asked.

“Hm . . .”

I thought it would be fine for Inukami-senpai and Kazuki to take part, but I was hesitant. I figured that “practical training” meant practicing attack magic. Even though I could punch and kick things with my healing magic, without the magic, it was just, well . . . violence.

“I’m just a healer,” I said. “I don’t think there’s much point to me taking part.”

“Really? A pity,” said Halpha.

Whoa, hang on. Why does he look so upset? Seeing him all down in the dumps like that makes me feel guilty. But what is he expecting from a healer like me? I mean, as a magic user, I do only three things—I run, I hit, and I heal.

“Looks like the time has come to show your real power, Usato-kun,” said Inukami-senpai with a knowing smile.

As usual, senpai was talking crazy to me. I found it kind of reassuring.

“Come on, senpai,” I said. “I can’t use attack magic like you and Kazuki. All I can do is punch and kick things.”

“Yeah, but those punches and kicks are brutal. At *your* level, it’s no different from magic,” she said.

Wait, is she trying to say that I’m inhuman now?

Whatever the case, my healing magic wasn’t any different from ordinary physical attacks, and I wasn’t keen on showing it to people who used true and proper magic abilities.

“I dare say we’ve spent enough time talking. Shall we be moving along?” said Halpha, spinning around and walking again.

I couldn’t help but wonder why Halpha looked so disappointed when I said I wouldn’t take part in the practical training. I mean, wasn’t it best to show off the heroes’ magic rather than mine? I was just a nobody, after all. Did Halpha have some specific reason for wanting me to take part?

“Maybe I’m just reading into it too much . . .” I muttered.

We walked through a neat hallway and out into the open air. We’d left through a big set of doors and arrived at another open square. Now we’d finally get a chance to check out the school’s classes.

Students were firing magic at their own individual targets. The first student I saw was a young boy holding his palm out toward a round white target that was hammered into the ground.

“Burn!” he cried as a fireball leaped from his hands.

Next to him, a girl put her hands on the earth and let out a battle cry. Stones were sent flying out from the ground below.

This was nothing like the sense of freedom that I got from the school square the previous day. The energy and the determination—it was completely different. Senpai was . . . Well, she was over the moon. She was so impressed that she was trembling. She turned to me and poked me hard in the shoulder.

“Look, senpai,” I said, “I get that you’re happy, but please stop poking me.”

To be honest, it was annoying as heck.

“Kazuki, please,” I begged, “do something about her, please!”

Kazuki laughed. He seemed to be enjoying it.

“Impossible,” he said. “Hang in there, Usato.”

Kazuki had left me for dead, so I just let the overly excited Inukami-senpai keep poking me. Halpha led us to a place where we could look out over all of the students. Then he turned to us.

“This is the class I’m assigned to,” he said. “However, as we have some lower-grade students training with us today, I should make it clear that they’re not *all* my classmates.”

“Lower-grade students? Oh, now that you mention it, some of the students *do* look young.”

When I looked more closely, I saw that the practicing students had observers by their sides—students that were perhaps two or three years younger. Then something caught my eye.

“Hm . . . ?”

In a corner of the square, there were a couple of people I’d seen before.

That’s Kyo and Kiriha. Are they in Halpha’s class?

Kiriha was firing blades of wind through her gauntlets, cutting her target over

and over. Meanwhile, Kyo was throwing kicks to create wind blades of his own, sending diagonal slices into his own target.

“Wind, huh . . . ?” I muttered.

It was really cool. Kyo must have noticed me watching them because he suddenly looked shocked and said something to Kiriha. When she looked over, I waved at her. Her eyes bulged out of her head in shock, but she managed a short wave in reply.

“You know those two, do you?” asked Halpha. There was a hint of surprise in his voice.

I didn’t want him getting the wrong idea, so I simply nodded. Halpha looked strangely impressed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m just surprised,” he replied. “Kyo and Kiriha rarely interact with humans. They’re rather curt and rude if you even try to speak with them.”

So that’s the sort of people they are at school, huh?

I turned to look back at the two of them when Inukami-senpai, who seemed to have finally calmed down, tapped me gently on the shoulder.

“Are those two Amako’s friends?” she asked.

Her question was a whisper to make sure Halpha didn’t hear.

“Yes,” I whispered back.

“Ugh, I *love* the ears. Introduce me later?”

“No,” I said with a smile.

After everything I’ve done to gain their trust, I’m not going to have you shatter

it into pieces with your hyperactive personality. I know it's going to hurt you—believe me, I know—but you're just going to have to be a little more patient, senpai.

“What?! But why?!”

Senpai was still shaking me by the shoulders when Halpha turned to us again.

“Well then,” he said, “shall I introduce you to everyone?”

In so saying, Halpha's kindly voice grew suddenly sharp and cold.

“Assemble!” he shouted.

Both the older and the younger students responded immediately, running over to Halpha. We were suddenly a target for all their curious stares.

“Usually, when we have shared training sessions like this, it's a chance for the lower grades to learn magic by watching their seniors. Today, however, things are a little different,” said Halpha, his voice stern. The students lined up in front of him were clearly nervous. “We're lucky enough to have three of Llinger's emissaries with us today. They're here to see our school. They are more experienced and capable than any of us here, so do make sure you're on your best behavior.”

Halpha's explanation didn't convince everyone, and there were a few sets of eyes that looked at us with suspicion—that is to say, looked at *me* with suspicion. On top of that, one of those sets of eyes belonged to Kyo. But I wasn't surprised—anybody would be suspicious if they saw an ordinary teenager like me standing behind the stunning duo that was Kazuki and senpai.

“That guy in the white! He's the one that Kiriha punched yesterday!” said someone from among the whispering students.

Yesterday? What were they talking about? If they meant what happened

around noon, then there was ill will behind the comment. And as expected, several students seemed to get the wrong idea about the word “punched” and stabbed me with suspicious stares.

“Er . . . What happened yesterday?” asked Kazuki.

I face-palmed.

“It was a misunderstanding . . .” I groaned.

I mean, I guess I only had myself to blame, but in that situation, of course *someone* was going to see me. Still, as long as Kazuki and senpai didn’t think anything more of it, that was a win in my books. Just as I was beginning to relax, however, one of the lower-grade students spoke up.

“Excuse me,” said a young, high-pitched voice. “If those three are stronger than all of us, then may we have a magic demonstration?”

The voice belonged to a young girl with her hand raised. Her hair was arranged on either side into pigtails, and it was clear by her face that she was dubious of us.

“Just as expected . . .” whispered Halpha in a voice I just barely caught.

His tone of voice was so calm and cool that it was almost as though he’d seen the girl’s question coming.

“So what you’re saying,” he said with a sigh, “is that you won’t respect them until they show you what they’re capable of. Is that right?”

Halpha turned to us slowly.

“As you can see, it looks as though they’d like a demonstration, so—”

“Ooh! Me! Let me!” cried Inukami-senpai. “Just point me at a target!”

Oh, my little pigtailed friend, you made one big mistake. You opened

Pandora's box. Senpai is a girl who is way, way, way too excited to be here.

Halpha let out a strange little laugh at the sight of the animated Inukami-senpai and gestured for her to go right ahead. I covered my face with my hands in embarrassment.

*

The training was very simple. All you had to do was hit the magic-resistant targets with your magic. When I thought back to what I'd seen, I realized that although the students had damaged their targets, none of the targets had been destroyed—the targets must have been really durable against magic attacks.

"Hm . . . this wooden sword is hella awkward . . ." muttered senpai.

"It's specially made to withstand magic, so please do the best you can with it," said Halpha.

Senpai was going to use a weapon for her magic, so she was given a wooden sword. Actually, anything was permitted—you could attack unarmed, wield a sword, or even equip gauntlets. You could also just use raw magic as well, which made it feel like a shooting range with an "anything goes" approach.

Inukami-senpai stood in front of her target. Behind her, the students waited with bated breath to see what kind of magic she was going to use.

"Hey, Kazuki," I said.

"Hm?"

"Do you think she'll hold back?"

"Of course. She's our senpai."

I would have been relieved if he hadn't looked away as he spoke.

"But whatever she does, she's not going to let them just treat you like a weakling."

"She'd do that . . . for me . . . ?"

"That student didn't know anything about you, but that didn't stop her from shooting off her mouth. Senpai and I aren't letting it show, but we're pretty mad about it, you know?"

I was touched that they were thinking of me.

I turned my gaze back to senpai. She excitedly readied herself, waving her sword in a circle as she pulsed with lightning.

"Hey, wait a sec," I said. "Wait a sec."

I was touched, sure, but that didn't mean Inukami-senpai had to go all out on the training target. I was just about to say something, but Inukami-senpai took off.

She reached the target in the blink of an eye and was suddenly standing right in front of it. Her sword was filled with electricity, like a bow ready to be fired, and she plunged it into the target.

Her movements were so fast that at first the watching students weren't even sure what was happening. However, when senpai ran her sword through the target, they realized she had unleashed an attack.

"Huh . . . ?" uttered one student with a goofy befuddlement.

His reaction didn't surprise me though—I'd gone through training with Rose, and even I struggled to follow senpai's movements.

"We're not done yet!" senpai uttered.

Senpai left the sword in the target and stepped away from it. The sword was still pulsing with electricity, still building up, and still sparking even away from her hands. Inukami-senpai held her hands up, and with a supremely satisfied expression, she said—

“Boom!”

Electricity flew from her hands the moment she spoke. It struck the sword, and the sword and target exploded in a blinding flash of light. A few seconds later, as everyone’s dazzled eyes began to refocus, we realized that both the target and the wooden sword were gone—they had been incinerated.

Going overboard much?!

Who told her to go that far?! And what even was that crazy magic attack anyway?! That would turn a person into dust! There’d be no trace of them!

The observing students had been rendered entirely speechless. As for Inukami-senpai, she simply ignored the puzzled looks surrounding her, crossed her arms, and nodded in a way that said, *Job well done*.

“Beyond expectations,” said Halpha, unable to hide his surprise. “How about the two of you?” he asked Kazuki and me. “We still have plenty of time. You’re welcome to give a demonstration in the same way as Suzune.”

“I can’t use magic in any way remotely similar to that . . .” I said.

“In practical training, you can do whatever you like, whether it be with a sword or no weapon at all. As long as you’re using magic, even a punch is considered a magical attack.”

I couldn’t put my finger on why exactly, but Halpha was clearly putting pressure on me to take part. Still, my mind was already made up. More than anything else, outdoing senpai’s performance was one heck of a hurdle to have

to jump.

“All the same, I think Kazuki should go instead of me,” I said. “My magic lacks impact.”

“Hm . . . If you ask me,” said Kazuki, “your magic is all about impact, but . . . alright. If you don’t want to go, then I may as well give it a try.”

I’m so sorry for pushing this on you, Kazuki. But what impact are you even talking about? My magic is anything but impactful.

“Please go right ahead and use the target next to Suzune,” said Halpha. “And don’t worry if you destroy it completely. Would you like a weapon?”

“No, I think I’ll just use magic,” said Kazuki, walking over to his target.



Suzune returned to where Halpha and I were standing. She seemed to recognize that many of the students still had their eyes on her, and the satisfaction had yet to leave her face.

“So Kazuki’s up next,” she said. “Usato-kun, you’re not going to give a demo?”

“No way,” I replied. “Not after what you just did. What do you want me to do? Punch a target into dust?”

Senpai giggled.

“Well, it’s not like you can’t, right? Compared to an armored demon, an unmoving target is a cakewalk.”

I didn’t really know how to respond to an out-there comparison like that.

At that moment, Kazuki cast three bullets of magical energy about the size of table tennis balls. It was his light magic—a powerful and rare magic that had the students buzzing with more chatter than when it was senpai’s turn. Nonetheless, Kazuki’s gaze never left his palm—he focused on the bullets of light.

“I haven’t seen *this* before,” said Inukami-senpai.

“Remote-controlled magic . . . if he falters for a second, those bullets will dissipate,” said Halpha, his voice filled with awe. “His control is remarkable. Such subtlety—I hope the rest of the class is watching carefully.”

Even I was surprised to find out that magic was something that could be controlled remotely like this. I had thought that with magic like Kazuki’s and mine, it would dissipate once it was separated from us.

Could I do that if I worked hard enough? It sure would be handy to be able to

heal people from a distance with something like healing bullets.

“Fire!”

With a wave of his hand, Kazuki’s magic bullets flew toward the target. Even as they flew, the bullets were still under Kazuki’s control, and they sped straight toward the target, coming to a halt just above it.

“This magic is dangerous, so . . . go downwards!”

Kazuki brought his hand down, and the three bullets rained down on the target below at unbelievable speed. Kazuki’s spell didn’t have the impact that senpai’s did—and you might even call it simple—but I was left with the impression that it was much more dangerous than senpai’s spell. The magic bullets hadn’t blown the target up, but they had pierced right through the target before driving into the ground below.

“Looks like that battle against the Black Knight taught Kazuki his weak points, and he’s found a way to cover for them,” said Inukami-senpai.

“Y-Yeah . . .” I muttered in reply.

I can’t believe that the two of you have developed such ruthless spells.

It seemed that the heroes’ demonstrations had impressed the students and rid them of their doubts. They now looked up at Kazuki and Suzune with awe.

“I didn’t mention it earlier,” said Halpha, “but these two fought at the front lines in the battle against the Demon Lord’s army not so long ago. They are not to be taken lightly. And of course, neither is he.”

Are you really going to do me like that, Halpha?

All of the eyes that were locked on Kazuki and Suzune suddenly shifted to me. Whispered voices came with them.

“What sort of magic does he use?”

“He looks weaker than the other two, no?”

“Yeah, but maybe he’s, like, more than meets the eye.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about people railing on me like that just based on my appearance. Fortunately, Kazuki didn’t hear any of that.

“Um, what kind of magic does he use?” asked one of the students, pointing at me.

Halpa glanced at me from the corner of his eye. He probably already knew how the students would react once he told them. I had a feeling that I knew too—I’d just seen what this country thought of healers with my own eyes.

I let out a sigh. It looked like I had no choice. Senpai and Kazuki had revealed their magical affinities, so now I had to reveal mine too. Trying to hide it was useless. I straightened my collar and took a step forward.

“I’m a healer,” I said, “with Llinger Kingdom’s Rescue Team.”

Now, let’s see how everyone reacts. I was forged through irrational training and abuse—a few jeers aren’t going to hurt me.

*

Halpa brought Usato and his two friends to class. Kyo and I were in the middle of training when they arrived. Usato waved at us. Unsurprisingly, Kyo didn’t react, but I waved back—I just made sure that nobody else noticed.

At first, I wondered why they’d even come, but then I remembered that Halpa had told us we’d have visitors. Now I knew who those visitors were.

Halpha introduced the heroes and Usato, then told everyone that they were battle-hardened and much stronger than us. There was a provocation in the way he spoke—it was clear his words would elicit a reaction. Our class was full of those types.

I didn't know how strong Usato's friends were, but I knew that when it came to Usato, they probably couldn't beat him. I was a beastkin, and he was as strong as me, if not even stronger. He could heal any wound in an instant. If we were facing off against each other for real, I could cut him as much as I wanted with my wind blades, but he would just keep healing himself so long as he had magic. All the while, he would be attacking me with that crazy power of his.

That was like a nightmare.

But because of what had happened yesterday, everyone was skeptical of him. And because of me, Mina—a notorious problem child of the lower grades and a noble's daughter—got all fired up. I hadn't expected that at all. That girl was rotten to the core. She and her little gang members had been bullying a healer for some years now. Because of her family name, the school did absolutely nothing about it.

That girl. She was going to embarrass the heroes if their magic wasn't up to her expectations. Everyone around Mina knew what she was doing, but nobody tried to stop her—they were probably scared of standing up to her. I didn't do anything either. I wasn't going to say anything to anyone in class though. And though I could have said something to Halpha, in this situation, he wouldn't stand up to her either.

All the same, it turned out that Usato's friends were no slouches. Far, *far* from it. I'd never seen such destructive lightning magic in my life. Then there was the expert control that Usato's other friend had over his rare light magic. I was

literally shocked into silence. But of course, they were going to be amazing—they were the Llinger Kingdom heroes that Amako had told me about.

If only that was where it ended. If only that was enough for everyone, and we all went back to our training. But everyone changed the moment they heard Usato's words.

"I'm a healer," he said, "with Llinger Kingdom's Rescue Team."

And of course, it wasn't a good change. I could see Kyo freaking out about it next to me. Our class was full of hotheads. All they cared about was who was the strongest. I would never belittle healers of healing magic, but everybody else in the class—who knew nothing of Usato—all thought healing was for wimps and weaklings. As expected, the trolling started immediately.

"Ugh, just a healer . . . even I could wreck him."

"Battle-hardened . . . probably by running around with his tail between his legs, no?"

"Am I supposed to believe he's strong?"

And of course, the evil little princess wasn't going to let an opportunity like this go by without saying something.

"Healing magic?" asked Mina. "Is it *actually* strong?"

She spoke each word loud enough that everyone heard it.

Usato's smile didn't leave his face. He tried laughing it off.

"Well, this is awkward," he said flatly.

Just then, the light magic hero put the lightning magic hero in a full nelson hold. Usato's expression never changed—he probably wasn't even aware of what was happening behind him. But Kyo and I had better hearing than

everyone else, and we could *just* make out what they were saying.

“I know how you feel, senpai, but cool it!” whispered the light magic hero.

“What if it’s just a little?” asked the girl. “What if I only break her just a little? Just enough to make her feel the burn . . .”

“No!”

I realized then that if the light magic hero wasn’t so generous, Mina would have found herself in pretty deep water. Mina herself had no idea, however, and she raised her hand and stepped forward.

“Halpha, I would like to spar with this healer. Is that okay?”

“A sparring match?”

“Yes. He’s a healer who has fought demons, no? That means we don’t have to worry about injuries.”

You little wench. What you’re saying is that you want to turn him into a glorified target.

Mina’s destructive fire magic wasn’t particularly powerful, but it was perfect for inflicting pain. A perfect match for her rotten personality.

But she’d picked the wrong opponent this time. Usato was in another dimension compared to the healers that Mina knew. Ordinarily, healers couldn’t do anything but heal—they couldn’t fight opponents head-on, let alone match a beastkin like me in battle abilities.

In reply to Mina’s wicked grin, the edge of Halpha’s lips curled into a smirk.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said.

“Huh?”

“I can’t allow the beloved daughter of the Lycia family to be put in danger,” continued Halpha, summarily denying her request.

Kyo looked relieved, but I couldn’t shake the bad feeling I had. Would Halpha really deny her a sparring match just because she was the daughter of nobility?

“However, it *is* true that all of you doubt Usato’s strength. In which case . . . Usato?”

“Yes?”

“How about a sparring match with me in place of Mina? I believe this will be the fastest way for everyone to see your skills in action, so . . . how about it?”

“What?!” I squealed in shock.

Halpha’s magic sight wasn’t even attack magic, and yet he wanted to engage Usato in a sparring match?!

Chapter 2: The School's Strongest! Healing Magic vs. the Magic Eye!

Before I even knew what was going on, I was in a sparring match with Halpha.

How did this even happen?

"Um, Halpha," asked the pigtail girl timidly, "when you say 'in place of,' you mean . . . ?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. The only person qualified for it is me."

Halpha shut the girl down quick. A purple light flashed in his eyes as he turned them on me next.

"You don't mind, do you, Usato?" he asked.

"Er . . . I mean, I guess if we go light, it's okay."

Halpha had a magic eye that let him see the flow of magical power, but it didn't seem like he had any strong magic attack spells. I could probably just outrun the guy. If worse came to worst, I'd knock him out with a healing punch.

"So where are we going to do the sparring?" I asked.

"In the center of the training grounds, please."

The students were once again in an excited buzz at the prospect of Halpha in a sparring match. I realized then that I'd agreed to everything in the spur of the moment—was there a chance I'd gotten myself into something dangerous?

Well, there's only one way to find out.

"Well, I guess I'm in a sparring match," I said to Kazuki and senpai.

"Good luck, Usato," said Kazuki.

"Do it for me, Usato-kun," said senpai.

“Thanks, Kazuki.”

I ignored senpai’s air-headed comment and did some light warm-up exercises.

“Wait, what?” she cried, incredulous.

While I was stretching, I looked over at Halpha, who was choosing a weapon for our sparring match. I didn’t need one. I’d once used a spear, but I didn’t want Halpha getting injured, so I didn’t choose to use one.

“Hey!”

I heard the shout along with feet stomping toward me from the crowd of students. The shout came from Kyo. I wondered if it was okay for him to do this—he was drawing a lot of attention from his classmates.

“Hm? You sure it’s okay to be seen talking with me?” I asked.

“It’s not like I want to, but . . . don’t you get it? I came here to warn you!”

Huh? Why would he need to . . . ?

“A warning? For me?” I asked.

I wonder what’s gotten into him? I thought he hated me.

Kiriha arrived soon after, standing behind her brother. She looked as serious as he did.

“Look, that guy you’re fighting, Halpha, he acts like a nice guy for appearances, but he’s legit crazy. He’s not going to hold back, *at all*.”

“He’s crazy?” I asked.

“If anything happens to you, it derails Amako’s plans. So you have to stop this sparring match right here. That’s what Kyo’s trying to tell you. It’s for your own good. Halpha’s just way too dangerous.”

“Sure, it would be nice if I could, but . . .”

If avoiding the sparring match was an option, I would have taken it. But it wasn't. Not anymore. I had just told the entire class that I was a member of Llinger Kingdom's Rescue Team. If I dropped out of the sparring match and everyone said it was because I was a coward, that would be mud all over the Rescue Team's reputation. It might even have an impact on the results at our next destination.

And more than anything else, if I went back to Llinger and told Rose that I'd run away from a sparring match, I would be in for a fate that was literally worse than death.

No way was I going to submit myself to *that*.

I didn't want to make Rose mad. I didn't want her to punish me, and I didn't want to let her down.

“I'm doing this,” I said. “As long as I wear this uniform, defeat is not an option.”

Because, as I said, defeat would only mean *more* punishment.

“But Halpha sees things only in terms of the strong and the weak!” said Kyo. “He goes so hard on mages that even they end up practically disabled! Are you listening to me?!”

“It's alright,” I said. “I bet he's not as bad as my teacher.”

As long as it wasn't the kind of punch that launched a person ten meters through the air, I'd be fine. And anyway, Kyo and Kiriha had given me a good enough idea of the sort of person Halpha was.

I knew it from the way he snuck up behind me and spoke with that spine-tingling voice the first time we met. I knew it from the way he acted when he

heard I was a healer in the Rescue Team. And I knew it from the disappointed look on his face when I said I didn't want to give a demonstration—he was constantly sizing me up and curious to see if I met his expectations.

“Well then, Usato,” said Halpha. “Are you ready?”

I left Kiriha and Kyo where they stood and walked to the center of the training grounds. Halpha walked casually over at the same time. He held a staff about as tall as he was, and he spun it in his hands with ease, smiling the whole time. Now that I'd heard Kiriha and Kyo's opinion of the guy, the smile struck me as unsettling.

“I'm good to go,” I said.

“Very good. Excuse me, Suzune. Would you mind giving us the signal to begin?”

“Hm? Oh, not at all.”

Senpai nodded as Halpha and I faced off. I stood with my legs shoulder width apart, while Halpha took a low stance, his staff pointed at me. I saw his start to glow purple with magic that seemed to be slowly getting more powerful. There was something cold in his gaze. As always, I covered my body in light healing magic.

All I needed to do was keep my power under control, so I decided I'd start by putting into practice what I'd learned most recently—I'd dodge everything I could weave away from, and if all things went well, I could test increasing the density of my healing magic.

“Get ready!”

I heard the pure glee in senpai's voice. She raised her hand up into the air, then glanced at Halpha and me. She took a step forward and brought her hand

down.

“Begin!” she shouted.

The very moment senpai’s voice rang out through the air, I leaped backward with everything I had. At the same time, Halpha’s staff came flying down right where I once stood.

“Huh?! I’m certain I was quicker to start just now . . .” muttered Halpha.



“I’m an expert when it comes to getaways!” I said.

“Hmph. Then I will catch you!”

I landed about ten meters from where I started, and Halpha was already chasing me down, ready to send his staff flying right at me.

He was *quick*.

Aside from Rose and the Rescue Team, this was the first person I’d fought outside of her with this kind of speed.

“Whoa!”

I turned my body to the side, letting Halpha’s merciless thrust go right where my head should have been. He came at me with another thrusting attack, but I could see it coming and I twisted my body. But as I tried to leap to the side . . .

“Oh, no you don’t!”

Halpha’s staff swung in an arc, tripping up my legs. It was as if he could predict my movements.

Caught off balance, I bounced off my hand and back to my feet. I let out a sigh as I looked up at Halpha again.

“This is proving harder than I expected . . .” he muttered.

“Funny. I was just thinking the exact same . . . whoa!”

Halpha launched into another attack—he had no intention of letting me catch my breath. I tried to dodge the attack the same way I did previously, but the staff thrusting for my head stopped at the last second and swung toward me.

I ducked in panic as the staff flew over my head, but Halpha was waiting for

me with a knee.

“Win at all costs, huh?” I muttered.

Just as Halpha’s knee was about to collide with my face, I twisted my body and evaded the attack.

Everything Halpha threw at me was aimed at a vital organ or weak point. This was why Kiriha and Kyo had tried to stop me. If Rose hadn’t beaten evasive maneuvers into me through training, I would have had no choice but to simply beat Halpha into unconsciousness already.

“But it’s not just that . . .” I muttered to myself.

I had a feeling that Halpha was predicting my movements. Did it have something to do with my movement being faster than his first attack? Rose had trained me well, but having to evade attacks that flowed straight into new ones made things difficult.

“Amazing! To think I’ve done *this* much . . . and you remain unharmed!” exclaimed Halpha.

“This is going nowhere,” I muttered.

All the same, Halpha continued to press the attack. I had to be careful not to get too close to make any mistakes, but . . .

I took a breath.

It’s about time I got a few hits in.

I wasn’t expecting to get out of a sparring match without a few bumps and bruises. With that in mind, I decided to shift from an evasive focus to one of pressure. I took a deep breath and raised my fists. Halpha held his staff above his head and came at me again. This time, I focused my healing magic on my

arms and accepted the attack.

It stung a bit, but it wasn't anything as bad as a sword or a spear.

"You shifted your magic to your hands?!" Halpha cried, shocked.

I launched a high kick in return, but Halpha deftly leaped backward and put some space between us.

Now it's my turn.

Before Halpha had a chance to ready his staff, I leaped at him with a flying kick. But just before it landed, Halpha dodged out of the way. Now I *knew* that he was predicting my attacks, and I would have to fight him with that in mind.

I just prayed that he wasn't on the same level as Amako—that would have just been plain unfair.

"Time for some brute force!"

I managed to leap into close quarters with Halpha. He'd composed himself after my kick and once more thrust his staff at me.

But this time, I'm not dodging!

I parried the staff so it missed my head and poured magical power into my fist. The staff made a cut along my cheek as it flew by, but I ignored it and clenched my fist.

"Predict *this*!" I shouted.

Halpha's eyes grew wide.

"What?! At *this* distance?!"

Before my fist collided with Halpha's stomach, I felt something hard hit my fist, but momentum carried my punch straight through, and Halpha went flying

into the air. He didn't fly particularly far, but I had to wonder if this was what it looked like when Rose did the same to me.

Wait . . .

"Oh no!"

*Have you gone insane! Why are you judging things on **Rose's** level?!*

All I needed to do was knock Halpha out, but instead, I'd sent him flying!

I ran over to help as Halpha plummeted toward the ground, but he spun in the air and landed on one knee.

"That's the first time I ever thought I might die in a sparring match," he said with a chuckle.

"I'm so sorry! I lost control for a second there, and I'm, uh . . . I'm kind of used to people going flying like that."

In the corner of my eye, I could see the students in Halpha's class. Their faces were pale, and they blinked like they couldn't believe what they'd just seen.

"I'd have been in a very bad spot if not for *this* . . ." said Halpha, showing me his staff, which was now broken into two parts.

Ah, so right at the last second, he was able to defend against my fist with his staff, huh? That's impressive defense. It's certainly a better defense than any demon I've seen on the battlefield.

I was, secretly, quite impressed. Halpha then readied the two sides of his staff like they were batons and faced me again.

"Can you keep going?" I asked.

"Thanks to your healing magic, it's nothing serious . . ." said Halpha. "But I can't let things end like this. You're so much stronger than I imagined. I'm so

enamored by it. I won't forgive any of them for looking down on you."

All the same, it was amazing that Halpha still had fight left in him after I'd sent him flying with an attack like that. I was ready for us to call it a day, but I could tell it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Well, alright," I said.

I let my fist open and ran my hand along the cut on my cheek, healing it. Once I was sure it was healed shut, I closed my fist and readied it for Halpha's next attack.

"I never intended to underestimate you," he said, "but I never imagined healing magic could be quite so formidable."

Based on the circumstances, it looked like I had the upper hand. However, Halpha's weapon had changed. His staff was broken in half, so he now essentially held a baton in each hand. That meant he could essentially attack more. He had less reach, but that didn't make him less dangerous.

"Guess I could break them . . ." I muttered.

Based on the feeling of hitting the staff earlier, breaking Halpha's weapons wouldn't require too much power. I was a little worried at the silence from the watching students because it was like they were at a funeral. I shifted my focus to disarming Halpha and rendering him powerless. I was sick of having to deal with him attacking me with all those shots aiming for my head, anyway.

"Aha," said Halpha. "So you're finally ready to get serious."

"Serious? I never even *wanted* to do this . . ."

"Oh, but you jest . . . I know the true difference in our powers. Your extraordinary physical abilities far surpass my eye. I apologize for pushing you into battle when your power is meant for healing the wounded, but forgive me .

. . I am only doing my duty.”

Duty? What are you on about? It doesn't matter. Not yet, anyway.

Halpha's eyes filled with an instant of sympathy before releasing the force of a wild beast. He held the two ends of the staff in his hands like an expert and looked ready to respond to my attacks.

“Well, if you're going to insist that I come at you . . .” I muttered.

Then you leave me no choice.

I jumped lightly in place, waiting for the right time to pounce. It didn't matter if Halpha was aiming for a counter or if his defenses were airtight—my tactics were the same.

Run and hit—as simple as that.

I leaped forward and angled to the right to take Halpha on from the side. As expected, Halpha had seen me coming, but all the same, I threw a punch filled with healing magic. Halpha took my fist with both of his batons and leaped backward at the same time to escape the shock of the impact.

But there was something off about his reaction. He followed me with his eyes, but his body was clearly moving slower. When I followed it up with a kick, he deftly evaded it and threw a counter of his own.

I tilted my head and weaved away from the baton and took a step back to look at Halpha more closely. I was on the offense, and yet my attacks didn't feel like they were getting through. I felt that if Halpha focused purely on defense and evasion, I couldn't beat him.

“I can't beat you with strength, speed, or endurance, but . . .” said Halpha, dodging all of my strikes and putting distance between us. “I've got plenty of tricks up my sleeve!”

“I’d really prefer if you wouldn’t look at me like you’re fighting some kind of crazy monster,” I said.

Jeez, I am getting tired of this . . .

“If you’re going to keep dodging everything I throw . . .”

I know I’m inexperienced when it comes to fighting, but am I really that easy to read?

“Then how about . . .”

I threw a front kick, expecting Halpha to dodge it. As expected, he leaped backward and into the air, but my momentum allowed me to close the distance before he could get too far away.

“So *that’s* your game!” said Halpha.

“No more running!”

At this distance, even with my lack of experience, I could get my hands on Halpha. Expecting him to block my next attack with his batons, I clenched my fist. We’d fought long enough now that I knew I didn’t have to hold back.

“Take this!”

I’m going to decimate those batons!

I put even more power into my punch than I did when I last hit him. I angled my fist slightly downward, aimed at his weapons, but . . . before Halpha landed where I expected, he kicked off of something behind him and twisted his body to evade my punch!

“Got your blindside!” cried Halpha, spinning and landing behind me.

“Huh?!”

His batons hit me in the back with the momentum of his spin, and though it didn't really hurt, it helped to propel my fist, which had lost its target. I couldn't stop it, and my fist collided with the object that Halpha had kicked off of in order to get out of the way. At first, I felt something soft envelop my hand, but the thing burst as my fist ran straight through it.

"Oh . . ."

It was then that I finally realized what I had punched. It had been hammered firmly into the ground, and it was the same thing as what senpai and Kazuki had just destroyed mere moments ago—it was a training ground target.

The chatter of the students erupted and had me in an uncomfortable sweat.

"Huh . . . ? Are you for real?"

"Is it even *possible* to break one of those things with a bare fist?"

"Er, what would a punch like that do if it hit another human?"

I ignored Halpha for a second and glanced over at senpai and Kazuki. Senpai was giving me a thumbs-up with a look on her face like she was supremely satisfied. Kazuki's eyes were aglow. Kiriha was trembling with fear, and Kyo was watching over her worriedly. Meanwhile, the students themselves clearly saw me as a monster.

"This, uh . . . This was probably already broken . . ." I muttered, unsure of what else to say.

I clenched my fist and tried to pull my arm free, but . . .

Oh no. It's stuck?!

"Like a lamb to the slaughter!"

I heard Halpha running up behind me. He was not going to let this

opportunity slip through his fingers. I was in a panic—how did I get myself into this?!

“W-Wait a second!” I cried. “Time out! I’m stuck!”

“You take what you can get!” said Halpha. “Never imagined you’d actually punch through a target, but . . . it *was* my strategy!”

“What the hell kind of a strategy is that?!”

Halpha ran up to launch an attack as I struggled with my predicament. I was in a tight spot with my arm trapped. On top of that, Halpha wasn’t the type I could handle with just one arm and my legs. I’d be counting the seconds until the end if he got to me before I could move freely.

No way. As if I’m going to let myself go down due to something as stupid as this! Rose will kill me!

I roared and threw a kick at Halpha as he tried to hit me with his batons. He managed to block it, but it still sent him flying. It bought me a little time, and I set about pulling the target out of the ground. I put my right hand under my left—the one that was stuck—and put all my power into ripping the target from the ground.

“Usato-kun, are you really doing it?! Are you truly leaving the realm of human abilities?!” senpai screeched.

Senpai, please shut up!

I clenched my teeth and stomped my feet down hard, and finally, the immovable target—which felt like a telephone pole—started to shake.

“Come on!” I shouted.

I grabbed the side of the target with my free hand, lifted with a burst of

energy, and somehow pulled the target from the ground. It must have been buried a meter deep. I'd succeeded in one thing, but my arm was still stuck inside the target, *and* Halpha was launching himself into another strike with his batons.

"Not! Like! This!" I shouted.

I swung the target like a weapon, forcing Halpha to leap backward to safety.

"Now *that's* unexpected," he muttered.

"Yeah, I surprised even myself," I said.

Still, I was lucky it was buried so shallow—it was easier to pull out than I'd expected.

"Amazing, Usato," said Halpha. "Those targets are kept securely in place with fastening magic, and you just ripped one right out of the ground."

"Oh. Um, but I mean, it wasn't exactly easy for me."

I mean, it's more likely that the magic just happened to be wearing off on the target I happened to impale.

All the same, I was surprised that Halpha had used the target as a means to leap behind me and catch me off guard. He was excellent in combat and aware of his surroundings to the point he could use them to his advantage. I could understand why Kiriha and Kyo thought he was dangerous. More than anything else, he could read my movements like a book.

I have to find a way to counter that.

"Oh. Now *there's* an idea . . ." I said.

I ripped my left arm free of the target and cooled my head and I remembered something. Halpha had magic sight, which was a type of magic eye—it allowed

him to see the flow of magic in humans and creatures alike.

I'd gotten so caught up in thinking of it as a kind of weakened version of Amako's precognitive vision that I slipped up—I hadn't considered how Halpha's own magical sight worked.

If Halpha's magic sight worked by sensing my attacks, then I could see how he was predicting all my movements. When we first met, he even told me that my magic was pure. In other words, he could see the flow of magic through my body even when I wasn't using it.

"Let's put it to the test, then," I muttered.

If he could see all of my attacks coming, I would never be able to land a decisive blow. But throwing everything into an attack on a human wasn't just dangerous for the opponent; it could also be used against me—and that had literally just happened. There was only one thing left to do.

"You're up to something . . ." said Halpha.

I clenched my left hand lightly, which had magic flowing through it, and approached Halpha. There was no need to seriously attack him because what I wanted to test was . . .

"This," I said, moving the healing magic from my hand to my right leg, then throwing a punch with my left hand. I put some speed and power behind it, but not so much that Halpha couldn't easily get out of the way.

Except that instead of evading, Halpha widened his eyes and panicked to defend himself. He just managed to react in time, but now I had a read on *him*.

"So your magic sight doesn't just see the flow of magical power," I said.

"So you realized . . ."

Halpha put some space between us and lowered his weapons. Then he took a breath.

“You know that magic circulates around the human body, yes?” he said.

To my surprise, Halpha began explaining it to me. Then again, it probably didn’t matter if I knew. There wasn’t much I could do to an opponent with eyes like his save for poking them out.

“Magic that flows like a gentle stream creates a ‘wavering’ that comes from a caster’s movements and spells. I can see your wavering—thus, I can read your movements. But your physical abilities surpass my magical power. That’s a weak point I can’t avoid . . .”

I see. Wavering, huh?

So the reason that Halpha’s movements were slow just now was because I had moved my magical power in a way he didn’t expect. The resulting confusion blocked his view of my “wavering,” and Halpha didn’t know if I was going to attack with my left hand or my right leg.

Halpha watched as the understanding dawned on me, then pointed his weapons at me.

“However, your feints won’t work on me a second time. I can still handle you . . .”

“Not after my next attack.”

If Halpha was reading my movements by watching my magical power, then it was simple. If feinting wasn’t going to work on him anymore, I still had the perfect ace up my sleeve. It was risky, sure, but it would work perfectly on someone like Halpha, who relied on reading the flow of magic.

I took off running, straight for him.

“It doesn’t matter how fast you are. Full-frontal attacks are useless!” he said.

Duh. Even I know that.

But for my attack to work, I *had* to face Halpha head-on—it was best for me to be right in the middle of his line of sight. I thrust out my right hand so he could see me charging it with healing magic, running at him the whole time.

“I told you I won’t fall for the same trick twice,” said Halpha.

“Then how about this?”

With healing magic activated in my right hand, I poured as much magical power into it as I could. My hand began to glow, and the pale green of my magical power grew darker.

“Light . . . ?!” cried Halpha.

This was how I would take Halpha’s magic sight out of the game—by blinding him. I swung my right hand to the side, and his sight was drawn to the energy even as he struggled to focus.

The tactic worked especially *because* Halpha’s eyes were so powerful. They were honed to such sensitivity that they could follow my movements, which meant, of course, they would see the powerful light of my healing magic as it surrounded my hand.

For Halpha, he had left a fatal opening, and I was on him in an instant—I kicked the batons from his hands and threw a punch.

“Wha?!” Halpha exclaimed.

But my uppercut was faster than Halpha’s defenses.

“Got you!” I shouted, stopping my fist mere millimeters before it connected with Halpha’s jaw.

I turned my gaze on Halpha's face, dreading the idea that he might still want to keep fighting, but . . . instead, he laughed.

"How very suddenly things come to an end . . ." he whispered, raising both hands in the air. "I throw in the towel. You have bested me completely. You are, it would seem, just as strong as I thought."

It was finally over. And it really *did* feel like it had come down to the wire. I heaved a sigh of relief and then became aware of the pain pulsing through my right hand. When I looked at it, I found that it was bleeding. Probably I'd been too hasty in the way I boosted the healing magic, and my hand couldn't handle the excess strain. All the same, I quickly healed it back to normal with my regular healing magic.

"At least the cuts weren't as deep this time," I said to myself.

It seemed like I was gaining better control of my magic. Well, at least more than previously, anyway—I was sure of that much. I was happy enough to strike something of a victory pose too—even if the gesture was decidedly out of character.

*

Senpai was giggling upon my return.

"I knew you could do it, Usato-kun!" she said, beaming.

The words provided me little joy. I looked around to see the students whispering to each other as they ogled at me. Halpha, meanwhile, wore only a satisfied smile.

Thanks to our fight, I'd discovered something I had to work on: controlling my strength in fights against other humans. I didn't even want to imagine what would happen if I hit one with the power I used against demons and monsters. Thanks to fighting against someone as honest (*I mean, I think?*) as Halpha, that much was crystal clear.

I let out a tired sigh.

"I know it's not in your personality to do that kind of thing, but that's what we needed for the test, you know?" said Kazuki.

"Test? What?"

But senpai only replied to my question with a smile that said she knew more than I did.

If you know something, quit the act and fill me in already!

"Usato, you were truly amazing in that sparring match," said Halpha before I could ask senpai a follow-up question. "But I never imagined you'd make use of a Mana Boost. Even I was astounded."

Halpha was surprised at the way I'd intensified my own magic, but the lower-grade students around him looked at him with blank stares.

"Hm? Oh, I suppose you haven't learned about boosting yet, have you? The Mana Boost is a technique through which magical power is intensified. A person's magical power density is, for the most part, something they're born with. But overcoming this is called Mana Boosting. By working hard and polishing the technique, even a weak fire mage could learn to wield great walls of flame."

For healing magic, the Mana Boost simply improved my ability to heal others while decreasing my own self-healing power, but Halpha made it sound like it

was different depending on the magic type.

“I see those looks on your faces and I know what you’re thinking,” said Halpha. “You want to know why we don’t teach you Mana Boosting right away. Well, the answer is simple—it’s not something for the inexperienced to play around with. One mistake and you could find your magic running wild to the point of exploding. It is only for those with precise control over their magical power”—Halpha then put a hand on my shoulder and looked out at the students—“or those who can endure the pain of the practice that results in mastery. Today has been a valuable lesson for all of you. You may make fun of healers and their healing magic, but here today, you have seen the power they can wield.”

It was a bold declaration. If anything, Halpha seemed to be fanning the flames.

Aren’t your students liable to snap, Halpha?

And there was a portion of students who hadn’t taken his words well—the ones who were making their glares obvious. The girl with the pigtails—who challenged me to a match in the first place—was practically seething.

It was then that I noticed a boy staring blankly at me from the building behind the group of students.

“Hm?”

The boy was small, and his robe was all dirty with soot . . . It was Luqvist’s healer.

Our eyes met. It was like he’d just seen the unbelievable. Whatever Halpha might have thought about it, I realized then that perhaps I’d made a terrible mistake.

I had shown the power of healing magic.

But just how much of that power could the other healer wield?

The thought made me very uneasy.

Chapter 3: Usato Takes a Disciple!

“Come on . . . cheer up, Usato-kun!” said Inukami-senpai.

“That was the first time I’ve seen you fight, Usato,” added Kazuki. “You were incredible!”

I was facedown on a table in the school’s cafeteria. Halpha had brought us here after the class observation ended. I couldn’t rid myself of the feeling of regret that hounded me—all because I’d gone too far in the sparring match earlier.

“Why don’t I ever think before I act?” I said. “I’m an idiot . . .”

Kazuki and Inukami-senpai were both regarded as “heroes who wielded powerful magic,” but when it came to me, it didn’t matter how you looked at it; I just didn’t fight like a mage at all. You just couldn’t call me a good example of a healer. I could already see the rumors spreading.

“It’s not just you, Usato,” said Kazuki. “We didn’t think much of giving demonstrations, and that put you in a position where you didn’t have any other choice . . .”

“I’m sorry too. I got really carried away,” said Inukami-senpai.

“Don’t apologize, guys,” I said. “I mean, in the end, I was the one who decided to do it.”

The problem was not knowing what kind of impact my actions would have on the school. There was every chance it could have repercussions for the healer here in Luqvist.

That reminds me. I should tell them about that healer.

I opened up to Kazuki and Inukami-senpai about the healer I'd met and what I'd seen at the end of that alleyway. Inukami listened with her arms crossed, like she had some thoughts about it.

"So what do you want to do about it?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Do you want to save him? Or do you want to give him what he needs to not get bullied?"

The two options sounded like the same thing, but they were fundamentally different. The latter meant putting him in a position where he would not be bullied again, whereas the former was a makeshift solution that would probably last until we left.

"To be honest, I'm not sure what to do," I said. "But I don't want to turn away from it and pretend it's not happening."

"It's just like I couldn't stand those students trying to belittle you earlier. That was a bit different, but basically the same," she said.

"I'm surprised you can say something like that without feeling embarrassed."

"You're our friend, Usato," said senpai. "Of course you're important to us."

The words hit me so suddenly I couldn't even look her in the eye.

"Oh my, did I bring out your bashful side?" said senpai jokingly.

"Leave him alone . . ." said Kazuki with an admonishing grin.

Talk about catching me off guard, senpai. Hitting someone while he's open like that is a coward's strategy.

I glanced at senpai and saw that she'd thought of something. Her kindly expression suddenly morphed into a bold grin as she put her hand around my

shoulder.

“Oh, that reminds me, Usato,” she said, “about that place where you’ll be staying tonight . . .”

“The answer is no,” I said.

“Read the room, Usato! The answer should be yes! I mean, I’m a good senpai, am I not?!”

Says you.

“Don’t you already have a nice bed and wonderful meals at the lodging?” I asked. “How about just making do with all that luxury?”

“I don’t need any of that! I want to live a life of fantasy!”

“Then be at ease,” I said, “because that’s all you do and talk about.”

What the hell? Live a life of fantasy, she says. What a turn-off.

Realizing that convincing me was not going to be an easy task, Inukami-senpai stood up and grabbed my shoulders. Suddenly, all eyes were on us.

“Get ahold of yourself, senpai!” I pleaded. “I’m not trying to be mean, you know?”

“But Kiriha asked me to ask you!”

“Since when have you two been speaking?!”

Since the training earlier?! Could senpai be any more cunning? And why was Kiriha dumping the decision on me like that?!

“Relax, senpai!” said Kazuki, trying to stop her. “You’re making things harder on Usato.”

Usually, she would have stopped there, but this time, she wasn’t going to give

up quite so easily.

“No!” she said. “I’m not going to back down. I . . .”

But at that moment, she saw something behind me and let out a little gasp of surprise. For her to go from heated to cool in an instant meant only one thing—there was someone behind me.

“You look like you’re having a good time,” said a female voice with a giggle.

“What *are* you doing?” said another.

Behind me were the golden-haired Gladys and Welcie, both staring at senpai and me with question marks in their eyes. It seemed they had something to discuss because they sat next to Kazuki, opposite senpai and me.

It doesn’t look like they’ve come for lunch, that’s for sure.

“We owe you all an apology,” said Gladys.

“An apology? Why?”

I had no idea what she could have been talking about. What would Gladys have to apologize for? If anyone had to apologize, I figured it would be me for the disturbance I’d made. Gladys ignored the watchful eyes of the students in the cafeteria and looked at us.

“Yesterday, after you left, all of the teachers gathered to discuss Llinger Kingdom’s letter and what we should do.”

“And that meeting is related to why you have to apologize?” I asked.

Did it result in something bad for me and the others?

“Well . . .” started Gladys. “Among the teachers, some openly questioned its contents. They were skeptical of the existence of the heroes and the power of the Demon Lord’s army. They did not think it was worth believing you, and

many agreed that it was our job to protect the children of this country.”

“We can’t really say anything if they doubt us—we’re envoys from a neighboring country, but we’re also outsiders,” Suzune said.

“All the same, it’s just a front they’re all putting up—the reality is that they’re scared. All they know of fighting the Demon Lord’s army is what they’ve read and heard in stories. The Demon Lord appears to them as a huge, powerful force. They rejected the offer of the letter . . . However, if Llinger Kingdom had fallen in its last battle against the Demon Lord’s army, their next target would have been us.”

This was true. If the Demon Lord had taken Llinger, it would have become his new base of operations—his forces would have only expanded from there. It was hard to imagine Luqvist putting up much of a fight—the majority of its mages were simply not battle-hardened. Gladys knew this.

“No matter how much I tried to explain, none would believe in your power. So with Welcie’s help, we arranged something of a . . . demonstration.”

“Which meant you had us attend a class and take part in it,” said senpai.

“You noticed?”

“When Usato-kun was fighting, I noticed *a lot* of people in the nearby buildings watching him. So I had a hunch that something was up,” senpai admitted.

So that was what senpai meant when she said that my fight was “what we needed.” She was a sharp one; I had to give her that. I wish she would have told me earlier though. Fighting Halpha was a whole ordeal and I drew way more attention than I ever intended. But then again, maybe that was exactly what Gladys wanted.

Gladys put a hand to her mouth in response to senpai's comment—she looked embarrassed and apologetic. She always had the refined aura of an older woman, but in that moment, there was something playful about her—it made us feel closer.

“I’m sorry for hiding the reasons from you,” she said. “But your demonstrations exceeded all expectations—the teachers who didn’t believe in you were stunned into silence.” Gladys giggled at the memory. “*Nobody* expected Usato to decimate fastening magic with his bare hands.”

*Ah, so pulling one of those targets out of the ground **isn’t** normal, then.*

I knew that my daily training had made me stronger all around, but I didn’t think I’d gotten *that* strong. The thought made me realize that keeping up my basic training was actually really important.

Welcie was nodding along with Gladys’s story until she suddenly remembered something and leaped to her feet. There was a very strict look on her face as she glared right at me.

“Usato-sama!” she shouted. “I told you yesterday, didn’t I!? Boosting your magic is dangerous! And to think . . . to think you’d use it in such wild, reckless fashion! That’s the wrong way to use it!”

Yeah, I guess using magic boosting just to create a feint for an attack was going overboard a bit.

Welcie looked genuinely worried though, so I felt I owed her an apology.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I overdid it, didn’t I?”

“As long as you’re aware of what you did,” she said, and then she broke into a smile. “However, I must say your battle and healing magic were superb.”

The compliment made me happy. I felt like all my hard work had paid off in

some small way.

“So was Halpha your man on the inside, so to speak?” asked senpai.

“Indeed he was. But the girl who issued the challenge was not. Only Halpha knew what was going on.”

That meant that when the girl had issued her challenge of a sparring match, Halpha saw it as a golden opportunity to jump in himself.

“I am so glad I left it in his hands,” said Gladys. “Any other mage would have been done and dusted before you even had a chance to show your real strength. That Rose sure knows how to train her members. No ordinary person can send a human flying with a single strike.”

I laughed.

“I’ve still got a long way to go,” I admitted. “Until recently, Rose was hitting me so hard in training that I was flying ten times farther than Halpha did. And get this—whenever I got out of the way of *that* strike, she roundhouse kicked me in the guts. It was crazy. Just absurd, you know?”

To be honest, until I got used to it, I really thought I was going to die. I think my brain probably automatically numbed itself to dull the pain.

“R-Really . . . ?”

“Usato-sama, are you . . . ?”

Um, wait. This is the part where you’re all supposed to laugh. You’re all supposed to be like, “That Rose sure is a wacky one!”

Gladys’s smile was gone, replaced by serious concern. Welcie, meanwhile, had a question in her eyes—something along the lines of, “I realize that you are telling the truth, but how in the world are you still alive?”

“Rose is wild,” uttered Kazuki.

“Is she even human though?” added senpai.

Leave it to me to make things all awkward.

“Um, actually, Gladys, I was wondering if I could ask permission for something?”

“What’s on your mind? As long as the request is within reason, I’m happy to help.”

“It’s about Blurin . . . er, I mean, the monster . . . uh, the familiar I brought with me. Am I allowed to take him around town with me?”

“I don’t see why not—plenty of students have familiars here.”

Yes! Permission granted! You just wait, Blurin! Your life of laziness ends today—tomorrow, you and I are going running!

Knowing that I could do my training with Blurin put me in a good mood.

“Um, Usato-sama,” said Welcie with some timidity. “You know that Blurin *isn’t* a familiar, yes?”

“Oh, really?”

What’s this now? What am I supposed to call him, then?

“Whatever do you mean, Welcie?” asked Gladys.

“Um . . . Usato-sama and his monster aren’t bound by a familiar contract. That said, it may be more correct to say that they don’t *need* to be.”

“We don’t?” I asked.

“A familiar contract is binding when the blood of both master and monster is used to enter into a blood pact. Sometimes conditions include a monster

submitting to their master's control, whoever it may be.”

“Huh? So familiars have to essentially jump through hoops to even become familiars?”

I had no idea it was such a bother . . . I figured it was like we'd just write something down on a piece of paper and then we'd be all good. But I didn't like the sound of the familiar contract. I didn't want Blurin to submit to me, like some kind of servant. Blurin wasn't going to betray me or anything like that.

“Usato-sama and Blurin don't have a master-servant relationship,” explained Welcie. “It's . . . Well, they're more like friends.”

“My, that *is* quite something. Partners without a contract . . . and what is this monster of yours, Usato?” asked Gladys.

“It's a Blue Grizzly.”

“A what?!”

“A Blue Grizzly.”

She asked again, so I answered again. But Gladys froze in place. Welcie looked troubled, like she'd had a feeling this was going to happen. Ururu had told me that blue grizzlies didn't usually get along well with humans, so I guess that was why they didn't usually become familiars. Or I guess it was just because they were dangerous monsters to begin with.

That last one made sense to me. Blurin spent most of his time lazing around, but at heart, he was a vicious monster—it was probably natural for people to be shocked that I was rolling with a grizzly without a binding familiar contract.

“Well, I suppose as long as it isn't dangerous, it's fine,” said Gladys. “Just make sure it doesn't run wild, please.”

“Understood. If it happens to get out of control, I’ll hold it down myself.”

“I would usually assume that anyone saying that about a grizzly would be a liar, but in your case, I actually believe it,” muttered Gladys so softly I almost couldn’t catch it.

In any case, I had permission to take Blurin with me around town. And that meant training would improve—the grizzly made for a good weight replacement.

“Senpai, Kazuki, what are you guys going to do now?” I asked.

“Why don’t we go visit Blurin?” said senpai. “Now that we have permission, we should let him know.”

“I’m kind of tired, so I’m going to head back to the lodging,” said Kazuki. “You two go off and have fun.”

I was suspicious of the way he looked at me and senpai as he talked, but I let it slide. Kazuki was heading back to the lodging to relax, and Senpai and I were going to see Blurin.

“Well then,” said senpai, “we’ll be heading off.”

“Please feel free to visit again,” said Gladys. “Oh, and also, there’s a magic competition in a week’s time. We hold it once a month. It’s a chance for the students to face off against each other in competition, so it’s a good chance to see a variety of magic techniques. If you’re interested, please feel free to come watch.”

“One week, huh?”

“As for Llinger Kingdom’s request, the discussions will likely continue for some time. Being that you won’t have any other duties to see to, I’ll leave it up to you, okay?”

A magic competition . . . students facing off in sparring matches. It sounded like fun. We bid farewell to Gladys and Welcie and headed out.

You just wait, Blurin! Your slacking off ends now!

*

Usato-sama and the two heroes left the cafeteria. I waited until they were out of sight before asking Gladys my question.

“Are you sure it’s okay not to tell them?”

“It seems he’s worried about it too, so for the time being, it’s best to say nothing. They don’t need to know that there was more to Halpha’s sparring match than convincing the other teachers.”

Naturally, the goal of the demonstrations was to have the teachers of Luqvist understand the power that the heroes wielded. In that, we succeeded with flying colors. Suzune-sama showed her overwhelming offensive power, Kazuki-sama displayed his precise control, and Usato-sama showed off his unconventional use of healing magic, along with his inhuman speed and power.

That said, I never expected Usato-sama to use Mana Boosting to launch a surprise attack. Seeing it sent a shiver down my spine.

“What the school needs, Welcie, is a spark. Something to ignite reform in the minds of our students. They are too concerned with power, magic, and race. The healer Usato and Halpha, with his magic sight, were a good place to start that fire.”

To show off conventional magic, Suzune-sama or Kazuki-sama would have

been better opponents for Halpha, and yet Gladys had deliberately selected Usato-sama. She wanted her students to see that particular fight.

“Healing magic only heals. Magical eyes only see. The two magics are different types, but similar in how they are perceived. It was valuable for the students—and more importantly, this city’s inhabitants—to see that they are more,” Gladys went on.

It was, in that sense, a sparring match to put cracks in long-held beliefs.

And to say that it was effective was an understatement. The students saw themselves as superior with their magical affinities and abundance of magical power. But they were now forced to understand how less powerful they were compared to magical affinities they had long deemed inconsequential and meaningless. Though the method was quite blunt, it was also quite logical.

However, although the letter made for a good reason, it made me sad to think we had to keep things secret from the three heroes. Gladys giggled.

“Usato is nothing if not a surprise. We go to the trouble of giving him a room at a nice lodge, and he stays elsewhere. On top of that, he ends up in the beastkin neighborhood. The beastkin in Luqvist hate humans. He truly is a strange one.”

All I could do was simply laugh along with her. The three youths had been summoned from a different world, and they had entirely different sensibilities. They looked at everything in this world with the wonder of children.

In particular, I could tell how trustworthy Usato-sama was whenever I saw him together with the beastkin, Amako-sama.

“He does not shirk away from creatures that are not human, and so I believe that he can change the prejudiced modes of thought that have taken root

here,” said Gladys. “I want our people to understand that every magic affinity is a jewel that can be polished to shine, that all magic can be put to good use, and that everyone can grow to be something special.”

There was a kindness in Gladys’s eyes as she spoke. She was responsible for this city, after all. And perhaps it vexed her that she was forced to leave this task to Usato-sama and his friends, but she was still its leader. Even if she wanted reform, she could not go about such a thing recklessly.

And that was why, in this case, she relied on us for help.

But this did not stop Gladys from putting a hand to her head as worry suddenly overwhelmed her.

“However, I must admit—I am *terribly* worried that today’s sparring match will lead to some students making rather rash decisions.”

*

Senpai and I parted ways with Kazuki at the entrance to the lodging and headed toward the stable where Blurin and Amako were. Senpai was in an odd mood, which had me worried that she would do what she did when we first arrived—be drawn to some item for sale and then disappear into a crowd somewhere.

“The other healer, the boy who was here, saw the sparring match this morning, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, he looked at me with major shock on his face. We’ve met before, so he was probably surprised to find out that I’m a healer just like he is,” I said.

“Don’t you think it’s more likely he was shocked because of how different you two are? To anyone who doesn’t know any better, you look like anything but a healer. He probably only realized it when Halpha told everyone.”

I guess that was one way of looking at it. I was aware that I wasn’t exactly your typical healer, but when I thought about it, I could see how Halpha’s words might have brought that expression out of the kid.

But why was he in such a mad rush to get away when he regained consciousness that last time? Because he was late for class? Stop it. Let’s not let our imagination get carried away.

Senpai must have noticed I had something on my mind because she simply walked alongside me, silently.

It was just after lunch, so the main street was packed with people. It seemed like word had spread about us since the demonstration because passersby were whispering among themselves while they looked at us. My uniform never helped me out in these kinds of situations. It was made to stand out, so naturally, it drew attention. I always hated it in times like these.

“You, uh . . . you kind of stand out, Usato-kun,” senpai mentioned.

“Should I take the coat off?” I asked.

“No, you don’t have to go that far. Your uniform isn’t just cool. The design of it has meaning too. I want to wear it.”

“Well, you can’t.”

I would lend it to her, sure, but another one couldn’t be made. The only other coat like the one I wore belonged to Rose, and I didn’t even know what it was made of. It wasn’t leather and it wasn’t cloth—it was some other kind of strange material.

“Usato-kun . . . up ahead.”

“Huh?”

Senpai gestured ahead of her at an alleyway I’d seen before. There was a crowd gathered. It was the same alley where I’d found the other healer unconscious.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this . . .

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Huh? Whoa! Usato-kun?!”

I was at the crowd in an instant, pushing through them for a better view. Just then, I heard a fiery rumble like a bomb going off.

“No way!” I shouted.

I assumed the worst and knew I had to hurry, but then I noticed a man in the corner of my eye—it was the bystander I’d talked to in the morning. He seemed to remember me too.

“You’re that guy from this morning,” he said, bewildered. “The guy with the weird outfit.”

“What happened?!” I shouted.

“Uh, well, that kid from this morning is getting bullied again. But it’s on a whole other level this time.”

Is this my fault? I never imagined this sort of thing would happen so quickly. If they wanted to vent their frustrations out on someone, they should have come straight to me.

I felt rage at myself, and it bubbled within me, but instead of clouding my thoughts, the rage made them clearer.

First, I have to get past this crowd to the square.

“See you on the other side, senpai!”

“Usato-kun?!”

I jumped, kicking off one side of the wall to the other, then kicked off the wall again to clear the crowd of bystanders. Now I could finally see things more clearly. There was the young healer sprawled across the ground, and then there was the girl with the pigtails—the one who challenged me to a sparring match in the first place. She was with a gang of sorts.

“Stand up,” said the girl, “and be quick about it. Or do I have to wake you?”

The healer groaned as the girl cast a scarlet fireball that was different from what I was used to seeing. Her groupies wore wicked grins as the girl launched her fireball. The healer was still collapsed on the ground and in a much worse state than when I’d seen him in the morning.

Why don’t you use your healing magic?! Wait . . . are you all out of magical power?!

“This is bad!” I said.

I threw off my coat and quickly wrapped it around my right fist while I took off running. I got to the healer in a few steps and punched the fireball as it came straight for us. The flames exploded and briefly surrounded me in black smoke. The magic wasn’t powerful enough to leave any marks on my coat, but it was still more than strong enough to badly injure any human who got in its way.

I brushed the soot from my coat and put it back on. I ignored the blank stares of the girl and her groupies and put a hand on the fallen healer to heal him.

“So you really *were* out of magic. It’s a wonder you’re even still conscious,” I said to him.

That explained why he wasn't using his magic on his own injuries.

"Wh-Why . . . are you . . . the same . . ." uttered the boy.

But that was as far as he got—he fell unconscious while I was still healing him. He had light burns and bruises on his face that looked like they came from being beaten. I had a feeling there'd be even more under the clothes he wore.

I needed to know how he'd been hurt so badly that he couldn't even heal his own injuries. How long had this bullying session gone on for? It must have been hours. It was even possible that the gang had started right after my sparring match with Halpha.

"Excuse me . . . would you mind not sticking your nose in other people's business?"

The pigtail girl was speaking to me. I ignored her and focused on healing the boy. I wouldn't be satisfied until he was fully healed—for all I knew, he might have gotten seriously injured during all of this.

But how could anyone so casually use their magic against another human being like this? All the mages and knights I knew in Llinger Kingdom had a strong sense of morality. Not that this was about forcing students to use their magic for the sake of their country—this was simply something that people shouldn't do.

"Hey!"

I felt someone grab my shoulder, but I was in no mood for it.

"What?!" I said, my voice rough and raw with anger.

The student who'd grabbed my shoulder saw my face and let out a squeal before scamping back to the group.

“If you have an issue with me,” I went on, “then you should have come to me directly!”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong. We’re all friends here. Seeing as you have no idea what’s going on, would you mind staying out of it?” little miss pigtail spat.

I was sick of pigtail girl’s drivel.

“Oh, I’ve got no idea, huh?”

After what you’ve just shown me, do you really expect me to just leave? I am over this. I am just going to knock everyone unconscious and take the healer somewhere safe. Isn’t that my best option? No. No, I shouldn’t be such a caveman about it. I have to calm down. I have to calm down. I have to calm down . . .

I looked at the bullies in front of me. There were five of them.

“Healing magic doesn’t exist so that you guys can just blow off some steam whenever you feel like it,” I said.

I had learned it myself. The hell, the pain, and the respect. Rose had taught me that healing magic was a power that helped people. It was not, for any reason, just an excuse to make a punching bag out of a human being.

“You ignorant, reckless kids don’t even know how dangerous your own magic is. I don’t even want to know why you’re doing it. I don’t care,” I fumed.

“Did you just call me ignorant? Don’t get all uppity just because you get to tag along with the Llinger heroes, healer!” pigtail girl replied.

“My captain is a healer,” I said, cutting the girl off, “and she told me something.”

I might be more prone to anger than I first thought.

I rarely, if ever, got angry back on my home world. Then again, I'd never seen anything as pathetic and disgusting as this except for in B-grade movies. But I would not stand for what I had just seen. I felt the rage growing in my heart—something clearly different from what I felt when I thought Kazuki and senpai were about to be killed by Felm.

I grabbed a nearby tree with my left hand. The tree trembled and cracked as I squeezed it.

"She told me that if I ever met any people worthless and despicable enough to look down on healers, I shouldn't hold anything back—she told me to hit them as hard as I damned well could. And you know what? You all look just like a picture-perfect dictionary example of worthless and despicable . . . and more than anything else, you need to learn that the word 'friend' isn't something you throw around just to get yourself out of situations like this one."

Friends? Did friends do this kind of thing to each other?

The tree trunk cracked and splintered in my grip and crumbled to the ground. The pigtail girl had been so spirited earlier, but now she took a step back, her face filled with fear as she looked at me.

"A tagalong? Is that what you called me?" I asked. "How about I introduce all of *you* to the pain you just inflicted on this healer? You are a coward without your groupies around you, little welp!"

I took a step forward and the girl's face grew a touch paler. I could see tears in the eyes of a few of her gang members. When I saw this, I relaxed my shoulders and let out some of the tension in my body—I knew I'd struck enough fear into them to keep them away for a little while. Adding a dash of Rose's tone of voice was like icing on the cake—super effective.

I wasn't crazy enough to get so heated I'd actually punch a little girl. I also knew from experience that with some fear in them, the bullies wouldn't dream of fighting back. If they did it again, I'd do what I did again, except that I'd raise the intensity and bring Blurin along for the ride.

I didn't really like threatening people, but at least this settled the matter for now. All that was left to do was find a place to let the healer sleep for a little while.

"Usato-kun, please calm down."

"Hm?"

Senpai must have finally made her way through the crowd because I noticed she had her hands on my shoulders, trying to ease my temper.



She'd gotten here just in time. With everything settled, I could ask her advice about where to take the healer.

"Great timing, senpai," I said. "I was just about to—"

But senpai wasn't listening to me. She was facing the pigtail girl and her friends.

"Look at you lot, drawing the ire of a healer like that," she said with a provoking tone of voice. "You may value strength above all else, but this isn't strength. It's just bullying. It's persecution," senpai lectured them.

Huh? Senpai, you didn't . . . you didn't really think I was angry, did you?

Inukami-senpai stepped out in front of me. With someone in front of her who looked more like a regular adult, some of pigtail girl's fear dissipated—she shot senpai an irritated glare.

"We came here on an important duty—one that will potentially decide the fate of the nation. It may vex me wildly, but because of that, I can't lay a finger on you."

Senpai stated her warning with a light smile on her face, keeping the young girl and her cronies in check. I understood why she was angry, but I really wanted her to notice me looking confused back here.

"S-So what are you trying to say?" asked the girl.

"There's a magic competition being held a week from now, yes?"

"There's no way I can win that! Not against you heroes or that monster!"

"Hey!"

I butted in before I realized it. It was that word again.

Why do I always get categorized as a monster?

Pigtail girl shrieked.

And if you were going to call people monsters, watch your reactions, okay?

The girl had revealed her true colors, and she wasn't holding back in the slightest. She made it one hundred percent clear that she saw me as her enemy. Which, all things considered, was probably unavoidable.

Anyway, I was more concerned with senpai. I didn't know why she was bringing up the competition, but I knew it was completely different from my earlier sparring match.

As since it's an official school event, there's no way we'll be able to compete, right?

"Usato and I won't be the ones doing the fighting," said senpai. "It'll be you and the boy you were just bullying."

"Huh? You're saying *he* stands a chance against *me*?"

*Hang on a sec. Now I've got **no** idea where you're going, senpai.*

Putting that kid in the ring would be a beatdown. Also, he was currently unconscious. Also, being that I'd just played a game of intimidation of my own, it felt awkward butting in to ask senpai what she was up to.

Inukami-senpai ignored the girl's glare and pointed back at me with her thumb.

"I'm saying that we'll make *him* stronger than *you* in a week. Well, Usato-kun will, that is."

"Wha?!"

I'll do what now?!

I couldn't believe that she had just dumped that on me.

"W-Wait a second," I said, whispering to her. "What are you talking about?!"

"These two have a beef, so it's best if they work it out between themselves. Bitter medicine, maybe, but I couldn't think of a better option," senpai stated.

"Well, okay, but still . . ."

"And you're the best choice. Nobody knows healing magic in this place better than you."

So I'm a trainer now? And I only have one week . . . Wait, including today and the day of the tournament, that only leaves five days.

But the reality of it was that we really couldn't think of any other options outside of this one. Having the boy face his bullies with his own power really was the most effective way to put a stop to the bullying, but it was also probably the most troublesome and difficult.

Senpai took my silence as implicit agreement and turned back to the girl.

"Whether you want to take the challenge is up to you," she said. "If you're scared of losing to a healer, then just don't compete, yeah?"

"Ha! Enough jokes. But be prepared for when he loses. I don't care if you're envoys from Llinger Kingdom *or* heroes," pigtail girl snarled. "I will have you punished! So you'd best make sure that pathetic healer is as strong as you can get him!"

With that said, the girl and her groupies turned and left for the main street, away from the alleyway.

What have I got myself wrapped up in this time?

“I was so surprised when I saw you snap, Usato-kun! If you’d laid a finger on those kids, we may as well have just burned the letter we brought with us.”

“Dolt,” I said.

Firstly, I gave senpai a light chop for taking things a step too far. I knew she had the best intentions in mind, but she deserved that much, at least.

“Ouch?! What was *that* for?!”

Senpai clutched her head, her eyes filled with tears.

Weird, I only meant for that to be a gentle tap.

I ignored her and explained.

“Look, senpai, I was angry. I’ll admit it. But I was never going to *actually* hurt any of those kids.”

“Huh?” Senpai’s momentary confusion turned to laughter. “You were about as terrifying as humanly possible, Usato-kun.”

“I only wanted to put a little fear into them.”

At that point, the bystanders who were listening around us started whispering among themselves.

“Did he say a little?”

“Yeah, no way. I’ve seen ogres in books that didn’t look as scary as he did.”

“You saw him destroy that tree with his bare hands, right? You have to be as strong as a beastkin to do anything like that.”

“Beastkin? You think he’s friends with the beastkin?”

I, uh . . . I suppose I should give myself a pat on the back for such a convincing

performance. Even I didn't think the bystanders would be fooled by my act.

"The problem," I went on, "is whether or not this healer wants to do it or not."

"We kind of made the decision for him," senpai replied. "I feel a bit bad, but I actually think it's for the best."

"Yeah . . ."

Given the situation, it was entirely natural that we felt compelled to step in. And this was doubly true of Inukami-senpai, who was on the student council.

"All things considered, I am so glad that the upcoming competition is exactly what I thought it was," said senpai. "I would have been totally embarrassed if it was something else."

"Why are you so happy-go-lucky about all of this stuff, senpai?"

I couldn't believe her sometimes. In any case, I turned my attention back to the young healer to check that he didn't have any other injuries. If he'd taken that explosion with his magic power depleted, the poor boy could have died.

I'd heard that there was nothing scarier than a child with a lethal weapon. It turned out that it really was terrifying. I mean, that girl unleashed a debilitating magic attack without even a moment's hesitation.

Once I made sure the boy was okay, I hefted him onto my shoulder.

"Wow, he's light."

It was like the weight of his body expressed the suffering he'd gone through, and I felt something inside of me that I didn't quite have words for. There was a number of ways I could make the healer stronger, but . . . first things first—we had to find out what *he* wanted to do.

*

“Why is it so hectic and lively around here all of a sudden?” asked Kiriha.

She was looking down at the boy on the bed as she asked me the question. I scratched my cheek nervously.

“Well . . . er . . .”

I didn’t know where the healer lived, so I’d taken him to Kiriha’s house. And right now, Kiriha and Kyo were questioning me in the room where the boy was asleep. Kiriha sighed at my incoherent answer.

“Look, I’m not going to get on your back about you bringing this boy to our home. I mean, he didn’t look to be in good shape.”

“Thanks, Kiriha . . .”

“But who is he?” asked Kyo. “You had some reason for bringing him here, right?”

I decided to tell them about what had happened today. But the more I talked, the more Kyo and Kiriha cringed in discomfort.

“Usato, that’s Mina you’re talking about.”

Oh, so that’s the name of the girl with the pigtails?

She came off as domineering and selfish—I wondered if that was what she was actually like.

“Listen, Usato,” said Kyo, “you have just stuck your nose right in the thick of it. Is that something you get a kick out of?”

“Hey!” I said. “I’m not wrapped up in all of this because I wanted to be!”

I never thought Kyo would be so blunt. If anyone had willingly stuck their nose into things, it was Inukami-senpai.

“Anyway,” I said. “Who’s Mina?”

“She’s a noble’s daughter. There’s not much good you can say about her.”

I listened as Kiriha went on.

“You saw her when you saved this kid, right? Even when someone is hurt, she won’t hesitate to throw more magic at them. Heck, she’ll smile as she does it.”

“And she holds grudges too,” added Kyo. “Don’t expect things to just die down if she’s got her sights on you.”

When I’d first met Kiriha, she’d tried to punch me, but she’d also been trying to protect her friend. Mina, in contrast, seemed to have no moral compass whatsoever. The quickest way out of trouble was just to not get into trouble with her in the first place, but as senpai had said before, that was no way to solve the problem.

“Well, I guess we’ll just do what we can, then,” I said.

“Seriously? If you’re really going to train that kid, then you’ve only got five days—you can’t include today and the day of the competition.”

Kiriha’s worry was natural.

“Well, I think I know how to do it, but . . . it’ll be kind of on the extreme end of things.”

“Extreme . . . huh . . . ?” uttered Kyo.

“I’m going to train him in the ways of the Rescue Team. Fortunately, this kid already knows how to use healing magic, so it’ll be easier for him than when I

did it, but . . . there's no escaping the extreme part."

Still, considering where he'd be starting from, I figured it would be pretty easy. What mattered most, however, was the decision of the boy himself. If he told me he didn't want to fight, I wasn't going to force him. If he told me no, I'd go and apologize to that girl, Mina. That said, I was, admittedly, a bit scared of whatever "punishment" she had in mind.

"Anyway, we can't do anything until he wakes up," I said.

"There's one more thing I want to ask you," said Kiriha. "Do you mind?"

"Hm? No, go right ahead."

Kiriha had a different expression on her face than before.

I wonder what's up? Is she worried about something?

She was staring at me so intently I averted my gaze. Then Kiriha suddenly opened the door behind her.

"Amako," said a voice. "I wonder what Usato is doing."

I knew that voice all too well.

"Suzune! Usato told you to calm down and be quiet!" said another voice.

In a way, it couldn't really be helped, but perhaps I'd made things awkward by bringing senpai here. I could understand that Kiriha and Kyo—both beastkin—wouldn't be too happy about having another human besides me in their house. But it always amazed me that senpai was so wild and carefree wherever she went. I was jealous of it, honestly.

"I'd heard about the heroes from Amako, so I know they're not bad people. That said, I didn't expect to come home and find one just hanging out," Kiriha said.

“I’m sorry . . . she’s really not a bad person. In fact, she’s actually a really good person. But okay, I’ll send her home soon.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m happy to have her here for dinner. I mean, she *did* make the trip all the way here . . . And it’s not like she’ll turn us down, right?”

Kiriha seemed very uncertain about the last part of her sentence, but I didn’t know why—there was no way she or Kyo could make senpai uncomfortable. I told Kiriha as much as she let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness,” she whispered.

I wasn’t exactly sure what to make of her response. I was curious about it, but then Kiriha left the room to prepare dinner, so my chance to ask her disappeared. That left me, Kyo, and the still-sleeping healer.

“Hey . . .” said Kyo.

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry,” said Kyo, his voice a bit hesitant. “When we first met, I said some pretty mean things to you.”

“Huh?”

The apology took me by surprise. I spun to face Kyo, but just as quickly, he looked away, embarrassed. I was shocked at this sudden change in attitude.

“At first, I doubted that someone who looked as weak as you could really protect Amako,” said Kyo, each word coming out with that same edge of hesitance. “But when I saw you fight today, I had to change my view of you. You’re not a pushover of a healer. And yeah, it annoys me, but . . . I think Amako made the right choice when she asked for your help.”

I guess that was at least a silver lining on the cloud.

My sparring match with Halpha had resulted in some surprising effects. It wasn't all as bad as I'd thought—at least it was also a chance for Kyo to accept me. When I'd first come to Kiriha's house, I had written Kyo off, even though I didn't like the idea of us having something of a stormy relationship. Him saying this to me really made me happy.

To see him without the atmosphere of enmity that surrounded him yesterday made me smile. I thought it was really nice that he cared and worried so much about Amako.

"Wh-What are you smiling about?" Kyo asked.

"I was just thinking about how much you must like Amako," I said.

"Huh?"

But instead of reacting bashfully or angrily, Kyo looked puzzled. It was such an unexpected reaction that I felt compelled to ask him something.

"Wait. Am I wrong?"

"It looks like you've got the wrong idea," said Kyo. "It's not like I'm in love with Amako."

"Oh. I was just so sure that . . ."

I crossed my arms and dropped into thought.

"Look," said Kyo, "the reason I was so worried about Amako is . . . How do I put this? When we first met her, she seemed incredibly reckless. So much so that I felt like maybe she would just wander off somewhere and vanish entirely."

"Really?"

"I felt like I had to do something, but I couldn't stop her either. I mean, look, I

knew saving her mother was important, but she couldn't do anything if she didn't take care of herself first."

It was not an easy journey for Amako, traveling from country to country and eventually making it all the way to distant Luqvist. And listening to Kyo talk about it made me even more aware of how dangerous things were for her when she first arrived. Perhaps the two years she'd spent in Llinger weren't just about being somewhere she felt safe. It was also about healing the desperation that had eaten away at her heart.

"Now, I don't like admitting it," said Kyo, "but when it comes to saving Amako's mother, and keeping Amako safe, you're the guy. Nobody else can do it. So . . . take care of her, okay?"

I replied with a confident nod. Kyo was a more honest and kinder person than I'd first thought. When I thought about it more, I realized that the first person to try and warn me about Halpha before our sparring match was Kyo too.

"But seriously . . ." said Kyo. "What's that got to do with me liking her? She's younger than me, for one thing, *and* she doesn't act her age, *and*—ouch?!"

Kyo leaped into the air with a shriek. At first, I thought he'd been attacked by something, but in the next instant, all was revealed. Kyo crouched on the ground. Amako appeared from behind him. She was looking down at him, her face expressionless, and a look of contempt in her eyes.

"One more word and you'll make me angry, Kyo," she said.

"A-Amako . . . you *know* that grabbing tails is off-limits!"

Amako began to bear down on Kyo with her arms poised and ready to strike. There was almost something like murderous glee coming from her. It was so different from what she was usually like that I felt a shiver of fear.

I'd heard it said that certain topics were off-limits when it came to girls, and I guessed Amako fit that category.



I watched, dumbfounded, as Kyo saw an opportunity to escape and made a dash for it. Unfortunately, Amako quickly tripped him up and he fell to the floor.

I had to give the girl props: using her prescience to block a means of escape was pretty neat.

“Wait! Wait a second!” cried Kyo.

“What was that about my age? There’s only so much I can stand, you know? Say it again and you’re really going to get it.”

Amako’s eyes were like ice.

“I-I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” cried Kyo, bowing apologetically with tail in hand.

It was like the strong-willed, resolute Kyo I’d just been talking to had completely vanished.

“Um, Amako, why are you in here? Did you need something?” I asked.

“Yes . . .”

“Kyo, could you check on Inukami-senpai for me? I have to talk with Amako.”

“O-Okay.”

Kyo rose to his feet, clutching his tail, and left the room with his shoulders slumped. It was mostly his fault for saying what he did, but I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him as he lumbered away. Amako watched him leave without a word, then turned to me. She stared at me with suspicion in her eyes to the point that I averted my gaze.

“Well, w-what is it you wanted?” I asked.

“Nothing . . . it’s just that the boy is about to wake up.”

She moved her eyes away from me and to the room where the young healer was asleep.

Huh? Feels like there's more to it than she's letting on.

"Have you met him before?" I asked.

"Only in my visions . . ."

"What's he like?"

"Nobody believes in or trusts him, and he no longer trusts anyone himself. It's really sad. When I saw him in a vision two years ago, he seemed to have simply accepted his fate. He's younger than I am, but he lives a very tough life."

Wow. Heavy, much? That feels kind of beyond my abilities to help.

Maybe if it was Rose, she'd force some kind of a solution, whatever it took. But I simply wasn't capable of such tyranny.

"You can do it, Usato," said Amako.

"Easier said than done though."

But I couldn't really say one way or another right now—whatever was going to happen, it would happen after we got the healer's own opinion on things.

I put a hand to my forehead and stared at the ceiling while Amako dragged over a wooden chair from the corner of the room. She put it next to me and sat down.

"He's waking up," she said as she put her hood on.

A few seconds later, the young healer let out a quiet moan and opened his eyes. He peeked out from under his messily cut bangs. There were dark marks under his eyes. He was thin too, and he didn't look very healthy—I wondered if he was even eating properly. His eyes looked around the room and eventually

found Amako and me.

A long silence followed. I knew that we had to talk, but with him sitting right in front of me, I wasn't sure what to say.

Guess I'll just kick things off, then.

"Do you remember what happened earlier?" I asked.

"I . . . yes . . ."

"Okay. Well, how about we start with introductions, yeah?"

"I'm Nack," said the healer. "And you're Usato, right? You use healing magic too."

"Oh, right. If you watched my sparring match with Halpha, then of course you know who I am. And don't worry about the girl next to me. She doesn't bite. But I need you to listen to me carefully, okay? I'm going to tell you what happened after you blacked out."

"O-Okay . . ."

I explained to Nack what Inukami-senpai and Mina had agreed to in the aftermath of my arrival on the scene. But the more Nack heard of the story, the paler his face became. By the time I finished, he had his hands wrapped around himself and he was shivering in fear.

"W-Why would you d-do that to me?" he asked.

Unsurprisingly, the boy was in shock. And to be fair, I felt responsible for dragging him into things. But more than that, I knew that he was in danger.

"Things would have only gotten worse if I didn't," I said.

"But I'm a healer, so—"

“No. By the time I got there, they’d already put you through the wringer, right? You had literally used up all the healing magic you had, and Mina was just about to hit you *again*,” I explained. “I can say this without any doubt—if she had kept hitting you, you would be dead.”

That wasn’t something you skipped school to do. I had to wonder how much time these students had on their hands if they could lynch a person until their magic ran dry.

“Unfortunately, the reason they put you through all that pain is me,” I said. “My careless actions put you in danger. I’m sorry.”

I put my hands on my knees and lowered my head in apology.

Nack was flustered by the sudden gesture, but it was something I had to do. I was certain that the bullies had only recently increased their torment—they hadn’t been so vicious until now. If they had been, Nack would have been dead a long time ago.

In Luqvist, magic was everything. And because I had shown the power of healing magic, it had hurt Mina’s pride. But because she couldn’t lay a finger on me, her anger had only one place to go—Nack, Luqvist’s own healer.

“N-No, it’s okay!” said Nack. “You saved me, so please raise your head!”

I looked up at him. This was my responsibility. And so I needed him to make a decision.

“Nack,” I said, looking him in the eyes. “I’m going to get straight to the point—are you capable of fighting Mina in one week’s time?”

Nack was silent.

“Be honest,” I said. “I won’t force you. I value your opinion.”

Nack looked down and gripped the bedsheets in his fists. It was as if he were holding back his own feelings.

“It’s . . . It’s impossible,” he said finally.

“Can you tell me why?”

Something about his choice of words compelled me to ask. He didn’t say, “I can’t.” He said, “It’s impossible.” At my question, Nack held out his hand and let a healing light glow in it.

“You’re a proper healer, right?” he said. “But my healing is defective, so . . . it’s impossible.”

“Defective?”

*But he’s not calling healing magic defective; he’s calling **his own** magic defective. What does he mean?*

Nack must have noticed my confusion because he looked down dejectedly at his own hand and explained.

“I can’t heal anyone but myself,” he said. “Before I came here, to Luqvist, I could heal others, but . . . at some point, I lost the ability . . .”

He lost the ability to heal others? Is it like the opposite of what Mana Boosting does? But he doesn’t strike me as the type to be dabbling in that, and it seems so unlikely.

“When did you lose it?” I asked.

“I became aware of it about a year ago. I was on my way home after Mina had bullied me, and I found someone’s familiar. It was injured, and . . . that’s when I realized.”

“That’s when you realized you can’t heal anyone but yourself?”

Nack nodded. Based on the confused look on Amako's face, it seemed this was a fact she hadn't seen in her prescience either.

I'd never heard of healing magic not working on other people. I mean, maybe if his magic power density was extremely light . . . but no, that couldn't happen so suddenly. Nack wasn't born that way like Orga was, and besides, the healing magic alight in his hand wasn't so different from the color of my own.

*The only other possibility is . . . some kind of psychological block due to all the bullying. Well, let's not think too hard about **that** just now. Not when we've got bigger things to think about than his healing magic.*

"Healing magic is a magic for healing people. But my magic is broken, so I'm worthless now."

Amako seemed to feel that things were getting bad, so she looked up at me.

"Usato . . ." she uttered.

But she didn't need to worry. You didn't need to be able to heal other people in order to do Rescue Team training. I smiled at Nack with his dejected expression, and I put a hand on his trembling shoulder.

"It's okay," I said. "We don't need to heal other people to make you stronger."

"Huh?"

"What I want to know is whether you're prepared to fight Mina. I need to know if you're prepared to undergo five days of training."

To be brutally honest, the training I intended to put Nack through was going to be hell on earth . . . the sort of experience he couldn't even imagine. So I wasn't going to mince words or paint it like it was something it wasn't—I had to know if he had the will and the resolve to endure this training through to the

end.

That, and . . .

“Your magic is broken, you say? You’re defective? This is magic that is *only* used to heal people, you say? And me, a proper healer, you think? You’ve got it all wrong. Nack, you’ve been trying too hard to use healing magic the correct way.”

It was important to make it clear that I wasn’t a proper healer. Not by a long shot. Not compared to Orga and Ururu. They were both healers who focused purely on healing.

“In the magic training that my teacher gave me, it was all self-healing. So what you’ve got now, it’s more than enough. As long as you can heal yourself, you can do the kind of training that’ll let you knock your bullies right out of school grounds.”

“Huh? Wha?”

Nack was in shock, his mouth half agape with confusion. I grinned.

“Basically, it’s like this—I’m not going to teach you healing magic. Instead, I’m going to toughen you up to the point that you can completely overwhelm that girl.”

“Me . . . ? Overwhelm Mina . . . ?”

“Exactly that. But it won’t be easy. The training is both simpler and tougher than you can possibly imagine. You may want to cry, and you may want to vomit blood, and you may want to knock yourself out, but my healing magic will not let you. So I will ask you one more time, Nack: are you prepared to fight Mina?”

The vomiting blood bit was going a little overboard. I mean . . . I hadn’t

vomited blood, so Nack would probably be fine. Probably.

Ten seconds of long silence passed, and when Nack spoke next, it was with a certain hesitation.

“Um . . . it sounds like the training is going to be even scarier than Mina.”

Yep.

“I can’t say that it won’t be,” I replied.

“Usato . . .” said Amako.

Could you stop looking at me like you’re horrified, Amako?

To toughen Nack up, there was no other way—he would have to go through the training that I went through under Rose. Which was to say, that was the only magic training he could go through because I didn’t know anything else.

“Nack,” I said. “If you say you don’t want to do it, I’ll apologize so you won’t have to fight.”

Nack was silent. Whatever his decision was, I intended to accept it. And to be honest, there was a part of me that didn’t even want to put Nack through the hell that I’d been through. The Rescue Team’s training essentially amounted to running until you were unconscious, then being healed so you could run all over again. Being made to run from morning until night was psychological torture. It was days of suffering, enduring discomfort in your legs even though you’d been healed. Still, the results were undeniable.

“You mean that even I . . . can win?”

“I can’t guarantee it. But I can assure you this much—you will get as much out of the training as you put in.”

Nack still seemed hesitant as he listened, but when he looked up at me, there

was a little light of determination in his eyes. They were still dark and still hurting, but all the same, I saw a spark in them.

“I’ll do it . . . I’ll do it! I’ll beat her! So please . . . help me get stronger!”

“That’s my boy!”

I didn’t think I could become a full-blown Rose, but as a healer, I knew that I could take Nack and toughen him up good and proper.

It was a promise I made to myself.

*

“Training starts tomorrow. For today, make sure you eat well and get a good night’s sleep.”

First up, we had to consider Nack’s physical condition. It didn’t seem like he ate well. The healing magic had brought some color back to his face, but it could only do so much—he just wasn’t in good shape.

Though healing magic could keep him free from exhaustion, it wasn’t a substitute for nourishment. Eating good meals was going to be important. I’d learned the importance of nutrition after training firsthand. I knew the tears of joy that came after that first day of training when dinner was served and every cell in my body cried out for food. It probably wasn’t even an exaggeration to say that I’d never been angrier than the time that Tong swiped some of my food.

“Um . . .”

Nack’s voice stirred me from my trip down memory lane. He looked confused.

“Where . . . am I?” he asked.

Oh, right. I completely forgot to tell him where we are.

“Well . . .”

How to put it? Is it okay to just come straight out and tell him this is a beastkin’s house? I don’t really want him going all crazy and causing Kiriha and Kyo any trouble.

“Usato,” said Amako, pulling at my sleeve.

“Hm? What’s up, Amako?”

Her head was still covered by her hood, and it looked as if she were about to point toward the door when she suddenly stopped as if she’d messed up somehow.

“Sorry, I was too late,” she said.

Huh? Too late for what?

Just as I was about to verbalize my thoughts, the door behind us opened with a slam as someone entered. I had a feeling I knew what was going on, and I turned to find the ever-excitable smiling face of Inukami-senpai.

“Usato-kun!” she cried. “How is he? Is he okay?”

“Hold up! Didn’t I tell you *not* to go waltzing around like this?! I told you that *I’d* show you around! What are you doing?!”

That was Kyo’s voice I could hear right behind her.

Senpai was right there looking at me with a huge smile, and when she noticed Nack sitting up in bed, she froze.

Nack was in shock. He looked first at Kyo, trying to catch his breath as he

chased senpai, then at Amako, who had taken her hood off, the annoyance clear on her face. He looked at them, then at me, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly as he did so.

Senpai seemed to realize she'd been the cause of it all and quickly straightened her posture. She looked almost bashful as she put a hand to her head with a nervous grin.

"Er . . . sorry?" she said.

Yes, this is all your fault.

"Huh? B-Beastkin? Um . . . Usato? Is this . . ."

Needless to say, it took a long time to properly explain the situation to the puzzled young Nack.

Chapter 4: Nack's Training Begins!

Usato brought another healer home yesterday. Went by the name of Nack. When he looked at us beastkin, I could see fear and a hint of confusion in his eyes. Still, he was so weak we couldn't just send him home, so I let him stay the night.

We introduced ourselves to each other, but I didn't think we'd talk much more than that. To be honest, I didn't know how to go about even starting a conversation. I mean, he was clearly terrified of me and Kyo.

All the same, it wasn't like I wanted to get all buddy-buddy with him. But I was worried about whether it was even possible to take someone so timid and cowardly and make him strong enough to beat Mina.

For all you could say about Mina's personality, as a mage, she was a cut above the rest. Though she was still developing, she used incendiary burst magic—it was more powerful than regular fire magic and its effects were instantaneous. In comparison, Nack—and I felt bad for admitting it—was just a gangly, pitiful healer. That alone put a huge gap between the two of them.

How in the world was Usato going to raise Nack's level to the point that he was competitive with Mina? I figured it was impossible, so I was very curious about what training Usato had in mind—in every sense of the word, Usato was beyond all expectations.

"If I recall correctly, he said they'd been in town today," I stated.

Daily school life was different for each student. So long as you took enough compulsory classes, you were free to choose the other subjects as you wished. Play your cards right, and you could finish class before everyone else.

“But how is he going to train in town?” I asked.

“Well, that *is* what he said yesterday,” said Kyo.

Kyo and I shared most of the same classes, so we tended to finish and start at the same times. We’d finished early in the afternoon today, so we came to town to get a look at Usato and Nack’s training.

When I thought about how stoic Usato looked yesterday morning, I had a feeling his training regimen was no joke. It was also hard to imagine it being normal, given the monstrous strength that was on display in his sparring match with Halpha. In any case, I was preparing myself for—and also somewhat excited to see—something terrifying.

“Sis, you didn’t see Usato and his friend this morning, did you?” Kyo asked.

“You mean Nack. And no, he and Usato were already out training before I even woke up.”

Usato had asked me to leave some bread on the table yesterday. It was gone when I woke, so it looked like they both had breakfast. As for Amako, after she woke up, she said she was going to the stables and then she left. So Kyo and I ate breakfast, just the two of us, which was what we were used to. Still, it surprised me how lonely it suddenly felt. Maybe I felt that way because Suzune had been with us last night, and when it came to her, the word “eccentric” was putting it mildly. It was a rowdy evening in all sorts of ways.

“What do you think he’s up to?” asked Kyo.

Perhaps the one who changed the most, however, was Kyo. Since moving to Luqvist, Kyo had endured all sorts of discrimination and bad treatment, and unlike me, he made it known that he wasn’t fond of humans. That was the way he always was, but then last night I couldn’t believe how normal he seemed

around Usato.

“Hm? What is it?” asked Kyo. “Is there something on my face?”

“Uh, no, it’s nothing,” I said.

Kyo was kind and gentle at heart. His aggressive, angry attitude until now was mostly an act he forced himself to put on. And though I was genuinely glad for the change in him, it made me wonder about myself.

“Oh, I just remembered,” said Kyo. “When Usato slammed Halpha in the guts with that punch, you flinched. What was that all about?”

“Oh, you mean yesterday?”

I thought back to Halpha flying through the air like a ball. When it happened, I couldn’t help thinking that could have been me on the day that Usato first came to our house. The thought sent uncontrollable shivers through my body. If Amako hadn’t stepped in and stopped him, who knew how I would have ended up.

“It was nothing,” I said.

“You keep saying that,” Kyo started, then shrugged. “Well, as long as you’re okay, I guess.”

I could see by the look in his eyes that he wasn’t really convinced, but he turned back toward the direction we were walking. I did the same, and that’s when we noticed something strange.

“Hm? What’s going on?” he asked.

“Looks like something happened,” I said.

The shopkeepers and students by the side of the street were whispering among themselves. I couldn’t work it out. The street was usually so lively, but

today something was different.

Kyo looked ahead and let out a dismayed grunt.

“Kyo?”

I followed his eyes to a head of ash-gray hair on a face with a shady-looking smile.

“Halpha . . .” I muttered with shared dismay.

Neither of us were comfortable around the guy. We couldn’t get behind his warped obsession with strength and his take-no-prisoners fighting style. The fact that he only ever approached the strong in a friendly manner was, above all else, really creepy. When he noticed us, he shot us a grin and walked over.

“Hello there,” he said. “On your way home?”

As usual, the guy was all too happy to strike up conversation. But seeing him here made me wonder: what was he doing so far from school grounds? He rarely ever came out this far because he lived in the school dormitories.

“Yes. Are you okay after yesterday?” I asked. “No injuries?”

Halpha chuckled.

“Nothing worth worrying about. All of Usato’s attacks had healing magic in them—so they were all safe. Well, the shock from them was beyond belief, but still . . .”

He rubbed his arms with great joy as he spoke—if there was anyone as battle-crazy as Halpha, we had yet to meet them. But what was a lunatic like him doing out in a place like this?

“Um, what are you doing here?” I asked. “On business for the headmistress?”

Halpha’s magic sight was convenient in a number of ways. Originally, it wasn’t

used in battle, but it was a magic considered quite rare among a select group of those who researched magic. Halpha's magic sight and combat abilities earned him Headmistress Gladys's trust.

"Exactly that. She asked me to call Usato for her as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible?"

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

Halpha looked shocked at our puzzled expressions.

Had Usato done something that required the headmistress's intervention?

He didn't look like the type to cause a major disturbance all on his own, but . . . he *was* kind of air-headed, so it wasn't completely out of the question.

"I'm not entirely sure of the particulars myself," said Halpha, "but it appears he's been running around town since morning, and the complaints have reached the headmistress herself."

What in the world are you up to, Usato? Running around town? Complaints?

"You have to be doing something pretty rowdy to cause a disturbance in a place this bustling," said Kyo. "What did he do?"

"Beats me," I said.

Luqvist was different from other nations in that it was naturally very rowdy and a bit wild—most of its inhabitants were kids, after all. Magic was often flying through the streets, and nobody batted an eyelid.

"I'm waiting for him," said Halpha. "Based on what I've heard, he should be passing by fairly soon."

“So that’s why you’re here?”

“Exactly. It’s far too much trouble to chase him down while he’s on the move,” said Halpha, scratching his head. “Funny. You’re quite talkative today, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I’m just surprised,” said Halpha. “Usually when I try talking to you, we barely even have anything resembling a conversation.”

This was true enough—I rarely ever talked with Halpha this much. Kyo and I didn’t have anyone around us we’d call friends. And the only one weird enough to go talking to us was Halpha.

“That doesn’t mean we’re having a good time,” said Kyo. “If you want a conversation, you can start by wiping that shady grin off your face.”

Halpha laughed.

“Always so venomous, aren’t you?” he said.

Kyo let out a sharp “Hmph!” to which Halpha smiled awkwardly.

But at the same time, Halpha was right. Whenever humans talked to us, we either ignored them completely or kept things as short as we possibly could. It was pretty rare for us to talk to humans the way we were talking to Halpha. I hadn’t been aware of it at the time, but it probably started when we met Usato. That had only been two days ago, but even then, Usato and Amako had left quite the impression on Kyo and me.

The people in the streets were up in arms, and we could hear it loud and clear.

“Hey, looks like they’re coming!”

“H-Hide your familiars!”

“What the?!”

It all struck me as strange, but the students around us really did put their familiars behind them or otherwise tried to hide them.

“Huh? What?” I uttered.

Why is everyone getting so panicked?

Then we felt a truly unnatural air wash over us, along with the heavy, plodding sound of footsteps. It sounded like something much heavier than a person, and though it seemed impossible here in these streets, I still found myself clenching my fists and getting ready for a fight.

Kyo was no different. The two of us kept our eyes on the road ahead, but all we could see was the big gate in the distance.

“Why are you following us?” asked Kyo.

“I am so curious,” said Halpha.

I flashed Halpha an annoyed glare, then turned back to the road ahead. The main street stretched to the city gates, and we could see all the way to them. I strained my eyes to get a better look just as a small figure leaped out from behind a corner. We could hear him puffing and panting.

“Nack?”

There was no doubting it. It *was* Nack. He’d burst out onto the main street and ran toward us, almost tripping over his own feet. His face was a mess of tears and snot.

“S-Sis! What in the world is going on?!”

“Don’t ask me! It looks like he’s being chased by something, but—”

But before I could finish my sentence, another figure burst out from the same corner Nack had just come from. It was a mass of blue and white.

The unsightly creature was like nothing Luqvist had ever seen, and it tore up the ground beneath its feet as it approached us. As I saw the eyes of the man and the beast, I finally understood what I was looking at. I let out a shriek of disbelief.

It was Usato carrying a giant bear on his back like it was nothing. The two of them had terrifying looks in their eyes and they were chasing after Nack.

*

“Gladys called for me?”

Usato hadn’t even noticed us until Halpha stopped him so he could pass on the message from the headmistress.



Usato gave the Blue Grizzly a pat, which he'd put on the ground. He then crossed his arms in thought.

"Got it," he said. "Then I'll go to her right away."

"I'd very much appreciate it. And, uh . . . will *he* be okay?"

There was some hesitation in Halpha's voice. He looked at an unconscious Nack lying on the Blue Grizzly's back.

"Oh, you mean Nack?" asked Usato.

The young healer had been running like a crazy man fearing for his life. But there was something that looked like relief on his face when Usato had called out for him to stop, after which he'd summarily crumpled to the ground.

"He'll be fine," said Usato. "We've only been running half a day, and I've been keeping him healed."

"Wait wait wait. Half a day?! Are you a monster?!"

I had known from the start that Usato's training wasn't going to be normal, but this was straight-up outrageous!

Only half a day?! What kind of training is that?! If you want to build a person's endurance, you don't have to run them to death!

And why did Usato make it sound like his intention was to keep running straight on for the rest of the day?!

And can we talk about that Blue Grizzly for a second?! They're renowned for their ferocious strength! They're not something you just wear across your shoulders like a scarf!

I was so shocked that I couldn't help but just blurt out what I felt. The monster looked like he had no idea what I was talking about.

"Uh . . . no. That's rude to monsters, Kiriha," said Usato with a wry grin. "What I'm doing isn't monstrous at all."

"Wait . . . why am I the one being chastised here?" I replied.

Does he seriously not understand what he's doing?

Halpa looked off into the distance with his usual smile and nodded.

"I shouldn't have expected anything less," he said.

"Are you out of your mind?" I said.

This was entirely beyond the level of expectations. It was no wonder the students on the street were in a total panic. All of us students who were studying here rarely, if ever, fought monsters. And when we did, either they were weak or they were familiars. Blue Grizzlies lived in high-density mana areas and were incredibly tough, so we never saw them. And if we ever *were* to face something that massive, it'd tear us to pieces with its sharp claws and we'd be helpless to do a thing.

But Usato had simply hoisted one onto his back and was stomping around the city with it like some freak weirdo healer. I was really beginning to doubt the guy was even actually human.

And also, was the near-dead and still unconscious Nack even okay? What they were doing wasn't training—it was more like some kind of torture.

"Usato, you are . . ."

"Hm?" asked Usato, putting a hand on the head of his Blue Grizzly.

Insane.

That's how I intended to finish the sentence, but I held the word back and managed a twitchy smile.

"Oh, Blurin? Uh, that's the name of this guy. My partner. We came here together. Gladys just gave me permission yesterday to take him out of the stables."

Usato explained that the grizzly was perfect for weight training. It growled in response. Then it slapped at Usato's legs with an annoyed look. The dull, heavy sound of the slaps was clear as day, but Usato looked entirely unfazed. I was horrified.

"Alright, so you've got a bear called Blurin," said Kyo. "But why are you lugging it around on your shoulders in the middle of the day chasing after Nack? When you said 'hard training,' I was picturing something very different. What you're doing . . . Well, it's loony."

"Oh, carrying Blurin just means that I can get in some of my own training while I'm training Nack. It's like a bonus. I only have five days to toughen Nack up, so we're pretty limited in terms of what we can do. Er . . . by the way, what do you mean 'loony'?"

Did he just say . . . "bonus"?

Usato and a Blue Grizzly charging down the street is the stuff nightmares are made of.

"I don't have the time to train Nack the way that I was trained. I don't know how to be that cruel and cold-hearted, so naturally, the training is going to suffer. On top of that, training Nack's whole body is no easy task. With that in mind, I figured we'd focus on the legs. That way, all we have to do is run!"

Rather than do a half-assed job training for a lot of different things, Usato had

decided to focus on strengthening his legs. I was surprised to hear that there was a method to the madness.

“With a good set of legs, you can outrun almost every enemy. For the Llinger Kingdom Rescue Team, the basics start with running. The reason I’m still alive today, and the reason I’ve saved so many people, is because of all the running we did. Not that I intend to make Nack do exactly what I did,” Usato explained.

“Speaking of which, what kind of training *did* you do, Usato?” asked Halpha.

“I was left alone to fend for myself in a forest filled with monsters for ten days. I wasn’t allowed back until I’d hunted down a Grand Grizzly. Oh, and there were the weighted push-ups I had to do endlessly, and then dodging the captain’s punches, and . . .”

“Please stop. That’s more than enough,” I said.

“How are you even still alive right now?” added Kyo.

This captain was the person who taught Usato healing magic, right? It wasn’t a monster hiding in human skin, right?

I felt myself cringing as Usato broke into an awkward smile.

“At first it was really hard, and I can’t remember how many times I just wanted to run away. But it was all a necessary part of the process, so I don’t regret any of it. If it weren’t for my training, I never would have met Blurin either.”

I had to admit, I was *very* curious about how he’d managed to keep things friendly with a Blue Grizzly, but I had no doubt it was something extreme and/or all-out heroic. You could just tell at a single glance that there was that kind of level of trust between the two of them—it wasn’t a master-and-servant kind of relationship.

“I’m so jealous . . .” I uttered without thinking.

Kyo and Halpha both turned to me.

“Er, uh . . . no,” I stuttered, waving my hands to let them know they had the wrong idea. “I just . . . I just wish I had a cute pet too.”

I regretted the words the instant they left my mouth.

“Are you for real, sis?” asked Kyo, his face scrunching up. “That thing doesn’t terrify you?”

“Right?” said Usato. “He *is* cute. You want to touch him?”

But Blurin let out a clear grumble and glared at me.

“Uh . . . maybe next time?” I said. “I mean, you have to go see the headmistress, right? I don’t want to keep you.”

“Oh, yeah. I also have to get back to Nack’s training. Next time sounds good.”

Usato’s reply was a huge relief. However placid a monster might be, you needed a special kind of courage to go touching one.

“I guess I’ll get going,” said Usato. “Are you going to see Gladys as well, Halpha?”

“I’ve got a little shopping to do, so I’ll leave you to it.”

“Fair enough. Uh, Kiriha, Kyo . . . Nack and I will be back late tonight, so if it’s not too much trouble, could you ready a meal for him?”

“Okay. One or two more mouths to feed isn’t a problem.”

“Thanks! Alright, let’s go, Blurin.”

And with that, Usato and his Blue Grizzly walked off toward school—the healer in his white coat, his big monster buddy, and another healer spread

across the bear's back like some kind of hunted prey. It was anything *but* an ordinary sight.

I suddenly felt exhausted, even though we hadn't spoken all that long.

"That Usato," muttered Kyo. "He's all sorts of amazing."

"Yes, but I dare say it's not the kind of thing you want to mimic," I said.

"You got that right."

I watched as the trio walked off toward school. I was filled with an unplaceable feeling, one that I knew but would not let out.

It was an emotion I'd left behind.

*

After chatting with Kiriha and the others, Blurin and I headed to school with the unconscious Nack. I left the bear and the boy outside and headed to the headmistress's office, where Gladys greeted me with a great big sigh.

"What a mess. What a gigantic mess," she said with a worried look.

I figured it was because I'd gone too far with my training. I'd done things just the way I would have back in Llinger Kingdom. But this was a different place.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll run somewhere different next time."

"No, it's not about that," said Gladys. "Do you not know what I'm talking about?"

"You're talking about me doing my training in town, right? I mean, you gave me permission to let Blurin free yesterday . . . and that's really the only thing

that comes to mind.”

“Well, yes, it *is* true that I gave you that permission yesterday. That said! Instead of walking your giant bear around, you wear it like a backpack?! Who in their right mind would have thought you’d ever run around town like that?!”

“Huh?!”

I realized that she was right. When I thought about it, I saw that it *was* pretty out of the ordinary. I’d just gotten too used to the reactions of the Llinger people. When I saw people walking around with their familiars in Luqvist, I figured running would be fine too.

“My apologies. Let’s start over,” said Gladys, composing herself. “I know what happened after the . . . commotion yesterday. But would you mind telling me what led to you doing what you did?”

I gave Gladys the basic rundown of the commotion in town that had resulted in my agreeing to train Nack. When I was done, a troubled expression drifted to Gladys’s face and she put a hand to her head.

“I must apologize,” she said, “that one of our students would cause you such trouble.”

“No, it’s mostly my fault for sticking my nose into things,” I replied.

“Even putting that aside, we must take responsibility for letting Mina Lycia’s behavior go on unchecked.”

Wait, does that mean that this girl was on Gladys’s radar already? She struck me as the bossy ringleader type when I met her, but maybe she’s more trouble than I first thought.

“Why haven’t you been able to do anything about her?” I asked.

“It’s all quite complicated,” replied Gladys. “For those of us running the school, we must be careful about how we handle the children of the families that are our benefactors—a wrong step could be seen as a betrayal of trust. Nobles are a very troublesome type to deal with. They’re always meeting and sharing information at some gathering or another, and it would be very bad for us if they ever became aware of a scandal—the school isn’t supported by one noble but by many. It runs on the donations of the nobility and other countries.”

“In other words, you can’t just tell her off like you want to, but you can’t actually teach her either,” I surmised.

“That’s the long and the short of it, yes.”

That’s not just a mess; that’s pretty much a meltdown.

I could understand the position that Gladys and her fellow instructors were in. Their hands were tied because the issue affected the continued existence of the school itself. But that didn’t mean that Mina should be free to do whatever she liked.

Back in my home world, Mina would have been seen as a spoiled problem child and her noble mother and father would have been her monster parents. In my home world, perhaps the school had a few more options, but here, things were different. Without the nobility supporting it, the school could not go on.

After a long silence, Gladys asked me a sudden question.

“Now, it seems to me like you need a place to train the young healer, Nack, yes?”

“Um, well, yes. I don’t want to cause any commotion in town with our running, so I’ll start looking for somewhere new. I mean, if worse comes to

worst, I'll just take Nack up into the mountains for five days."

I noticed a truly pleading look in Gladys's eyes.

"I beg of you," she said. "Do *not* do that."

It was so good though—in the wild, I learned how to survive and sharpened my senses.

"You may use the school's practice grounds," said Gladys. "It should be a much more suitable environment for running than the streets. As the supervisor for the entire school, I'm not to speak my own opinion when it comes to personal issues between students. However, as an individual, I'll be cheering that young healer on. Not that it makes much of a difference to him, but still . . ."

Even if the school couldn't raise a hand to Mina, the truth was they'd let Mina's bullying continue. Still, it wasn't my place to criticize them.

I switched my train of thought to the new training grounds. I imagined it was the same place where Halpha and I had sparred. It was definitely big enough for Nack and Blurin to get some good running done. I asked Gladys about how much of it we could use and if students used it for classes. But it turned out that the grounds were left completely free and open for the week before the magic competition. We were free to use it during school hours.

Gladys giggled as I stood, arms crossed, lost in thought about what to do with Nack.

"Something about that look on your face reminds me of *her*," she said.

"Her? You mean the captain?" I asked.

"Yes. Whenever she thinks about what to teach someone, she crosses her arms and she wears a frown just like yours."

“Oh . . .”

Come to think of it, she *does* always wear an unpleasant frown whenever she assigns some new kind of training.

Does that mean that I was frowning like her without realizing it? I tilted my head and touched a finger to my brow. Gladys laughed.

“At a glance, you just look like some random young boy. But there’s no mistaking the signs—you’re every bit one of her students.”

“Is it really that obvious? I’m not even aware of it.”

“It’s in the little gestures, like the one you showed just now, and in all those wild things you do.”

I was mostly happy to be told as much, but another part of me admittedly had mixed feelings about it.

“You trust her, don’t you?” asked Gladys.

“I . . . yeah. I do. She’s pretty much insane, but I respect her.”

Rose put me through the kind of training that could only be called torture, but I was who I was because of her. When senpai, Kazuki, and I were summoned to this world, I wasn’t like the two heroes who had roles to play. I was ready to run and hide somewhere. Rose showed me the ways of the Rescue Team.

All in all—after putting aside exactly *how* she did it—I was just grateful to her.

“It looks like Rose finally found it.”

“Found what?”

“Usato, Rose is an incredibly strong person. She’s faster and more powerful than anyone, and her conviction is unwavering.”

I waited for Gladys to go on.

“But she’s not invincible. Even if she can break a steel blade with her bare hands, and even if her strength puts monsters to shame, in some ways, she is still weak.”

I had absolutely zero idea what that weakness might be.

Also, Gladys had said it super casually, but could Rose *actually* break a steel sword with her bare hands? Perhaps I was supposed to be shocked, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if she could.

“You don’t have to understand it just yet. But one day she will reveal her weakness, and you will have to be there in her time of need. You are the person she has been searching for.”

To be there for her . . .

I really didn’t know what Gladys meant when she talked about Rose’s weaknesses. Rose was the captain of the Rescue Team—she was stronger and more terrifying than anyone I knew.

Nonetheless, I took Gladys’s words to heart.

“Wow, you’re just like a teacher, Gladys,” I said.

“How rude. I’ll have you know I *am* a teacher.”

Oh, right.

Gladys let out a little smile at my awkwardness.

“Well, I should get back to training,” I said. “I’m so sorry for all the commotion I caused today.”

“Please just keep your antics off the town streets, okay?”

Gladys sent me off with a friendly wave as I left her office.

It was time to wake Nack up and get back into training. He'd had a pretty long break due to all the interruptions, so I figured he'd be ready to jump back into it. Not to mention, there were a lot of different things I wanted to try.

Being that we had access to the school itself, I figured it was a good opportunity to polish my own healing magic and Mana Boosting. The thought made me chuckle as I walked—I really had become something of a training junkie. Today we'd get Nack's body used to training with some light running. Tomorrow we'd get him used to running while casting healing magic.

I must have been moving faster than I thought because I got back to the gates in less than a minute. Blurin was still there waiting for me, and Nack was there, sprawled out on the Blue Grizzly's back like he was napping on a giant rug.

"Sorry for the wait, Blurin," I said. "Now then, let's wake Nack up, shall we?"

Nack was so deep in his slumber that he was drooling, so I shook him gently. A few seconds later, he opened his eyes with a groan.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"O-Oh. Usato? I . . . Why was I sleeping? Oh, that's right . . . It was a nightmare . . . I was running for my life from a crazed beast."

"Hm?"

What is he on about? A nightmare? Then again, I have heard that nightmares are more common in short periods of sleep, so I guess it's nothing.

"Well, let's get going," I said.

"Huh?"

"What do you mean 'huh'? You're still good, right?"

Nack looked at me and froze. It was like he couldn't understand the words that had just come out of my mouth. I tilted my head and watched as Nack began to realize that he was lying on Blurin's back. When he looked down at his hands on Blurin's back, he froze again. As he stared at me, he began to move slowly.

"Good for what?" he asked.

"Good for the rest of our training, of course."

In that instant, the light in Nack's eyes faded.

*

The results of Nack's first day of training were so-so. First there was the issue of stamina, but we'd cover that in the remaining four days. I didn't expect him to be fast, so I was mainly focused on getting him the kind of endurance and durability that would keep him constantly moving.

Starting on day two, we got into the most important part of his healing magic training. It seemed like using magic while running was difficult when you weren't used to it, and it was a real struggle for Nack.

In my case, my body had been forced to feel and learn my magical power while I ran, so I could finally understand why Rose had made me do the things she did.

"As long as we can get him used to it, we can work something out," I muttered.

I was thinking about the results of our training and how to improve them

while I watched Blurin chase Nack around a corner of the Luqvist school practice grounds. Amako sat next to me on the ground, her hood pulled up over her head. She didn't have anything else to do now that I'd dragged Blurin into Nack's training, so she came to watch.

"But if it comes down to it, I'll use Rose's patented Demonic Nonstop Forced Training and Healing method . . . Can't say I'll enjoy it though . . ." I said.

"Even the name alone sounds unhinged," she quipped.

I laughed.

"Well, of course," I said. "This *is* the captain we're talking about."

"Yeah, but it's just unhinged that you're thinking of using it as a last resort."

*How rude. I'll have you know that the **real** demon put me through even more than what we did yesterday, and that was **before** I even knew what magic really was. That is to say, I kept moving for what felt like forever, and I blacked out over and over because I couldn't heal myself.*

For whatever reason, Amako looked up at me standing there. It was like I was a pitiful sight, worthy of sympathy.

"Nack is different than you," she said. "You're not the same."

"Hey! Could you *not* make it sound like I was crazy even *before* I learned magic?"

"But I can't imagine any other way you could have overcome that crazy training you went through."

Wait. Hang on. I'm not crazy, am I? Admittedly, my memories of that training, with all the near-death experiences, have grown kind of dim, and I feel like my heart has become hardened.

Nonetheless, I decided not to linger on the thought—Nack’s training was what mattered right now. I also opted to look in his general direction to avoid Amako’s pitying gaze.

The sight that met my eyes was that of a panting Nack on the run from a pursuing Blurin. I noticed that Nack was slowing down and that Blurin had also noticed this—the grizzly was trying to take it easy by dropping his own pace at a near imperceptible rate.

Nope. This simply will not do. Taking it easy is the antithesis of good training.

Putting Nack aside for a moment, Blurin was no different from an official member of the Rescue Team, and slacking would not be tolerated.

“Nack, you’re slowing down!” I said, giving the healer a little warning. Then I gave Blurin a good and proper scolding. “And you too, Blurin! Get your butt back in gear! If you’re really a monster, then prove it!”

For whatever reason, Nack’s eyes began to tear up as he picked up speed through ragged breaths. Blurin, on the other hand, let out a lazy growl that translated to, “Yeah, yeah, I hear ya.” Blurin increased his pace to match the young healer’s.

Well, they’re both running at about top speed now, but why would Nack respond like that?

“Ugh, I am disgusted. Honestly disgusted,” said Amako. “I know you’re trying to be kind, but when Nack sees the way you talk to Blurin, he’s like, ‘I’m next.’ So of course he’s going to be panicked. Amazing, Usato. How many times are you going to surprise me on this journey?”

She nodded in agreement at her own words, as if to say, “Yep, you’re crazy.”

“Stop that!” I shouted.

Either way, I was satisfied—at least Nack was motivated. Whatever pace he ran, we were on our way. Nack was different from Felm because he was a healer. When he was about to pass out, his body would automatically heal itself as a reflex.

When I thought about the mess he'd gotten mixed up in, I could see how it was only natural that his powers would develop in that way. But relying on automatic reactions would only get him so far. Our goal over these five days was a drastic endurance boost and getting Nack used to using his healing magic while on the move.

"Amako, can you use your prescience while you're running?" I asked.

"Yeah. But because my magic requires such concentration, I can't see more than a sliver when I try."

"I have some trouble grasping that because I was trained from the start to do both at the same time. So be honest with me: am I going about training the wrong way?"

Amako let out a sigh as she dropped into quiet thought.

"I don't know. All I can say is that . . . a healer is a mage that isn't supposed to even fight, so it's not right to train them for that purpose. That said, even though your training is harsh, absurd, and certifiably crazy, I see the logic to what you're doing. Yep, even though it's harsh, absurd, and certifiably crazy."

"I heard you the first time!"

Yikes. I knew how she felt, but talk about scathing criticism. Regardless, I'm satisfied so long as she thinks there's a logic to it.

And that meant I could keep it up. When it came to training, you got out of it what you put in, and nobody knew that better than I did.

“Time for me to get my own training in while we’re here,” I muttered.

The practice grounds were the perfect size for what I’d been thinking about since yesterday, and as a bonus, I could keep an eye on Nack while I did it.

“What are you doing?” asked Amako.

“I’ve been thinking about testing whether or not I can fire my healing magic.”

I wasn’t talking about ultimate control over magic bullets to attack enemies the way Kazuki had the previous day. I was just curious to see whether it was even possible.

People would probably wonder why I would even want to fire off healing light. In answer to that question, I simply wanted to explore the capabilities of my own healing magic.

“I know some general magic spells work by firing balls of magic, but is that the kind of thing you’re trying?” asked Amako.

“Yeah, pretty much. I’m always using healing magic to cover my body, but to heal someone, I have to be right next to them. If I can learn to fire my healing magic, and then I polish that skill, it could be another ace up my sleeve.”

At present, the most I could do with my healing magic was heal others and what I was having Nack do—cover his body with it to heal exhaustion as necessary.

What I wanted to do now was something that Rose had never thought to teach me. Perhaps she thought she simply didn’t need to. If she was here, maybe I could have gotten pinpoint advice. But for now, I’d simply have to feel it out on my own.

I closed my eyes, held up my right hand, and started pouring healing magic into it. I was proud of my control, which was a cut above that of most others. I

gathered the magic in my palm, then tried forming it into the shape of a ball.

Pushing the magic from my hand was the same as using it. All I had to do now was see how close I could get it to what I envisioned.

I thought about Inukami-senpai, who sent out lightning as if she were releasing it from the palm of her hand. Then I thought about Kazuki, who created balls of light magic around him.

I pictured a clean, beautiful sphere of green. I didn't need to give this any Mana Boosting; I just needed to slowly bring together the magic in my hand.

There it is. I can feel it in the palm of my hand.

I opened my eyes to look for myself.

"That was easier than I thought. I'm, uh . . . almost disappointed," I muttered.

It was just as I'd pictured it—a ball of green magic floating above my palm. And it was so much easier to craft than I'd expected. I really thought it would be more trouble. I still couldn't quite believe it, so I looked over at Amako, who let out a sigh. She was far from impressed.

"Of course you can make a ball," she said. "That's just basic magic. It's no different for humans than it is for beastkin. I think it's weird that you've never done it until now."

I looked away from Amako and back to my hand. The floating sphere moved to follow the movements of my hand.

Alright. Let's do it.

"Huh?!"

Oh, she noticed.

I'd wanted to try hitting Amako with my ball of magic as a test, but she leaped

away as the ball got close to her. Her face turned to one of shock as she put some distance between us, *quick*.

“Were you trying to hit me with that thing just now?” she asked.

“Oh, come on now. You think *I* would do something like *that*? Impossible.”

“I heard you click your tongue just now! I also saw a future where I was suddenly glowing green. Who else can do that besides you?”

Her body was glowing green? That must mean that when the ball hits, it imparts whatever healing magic is in it upon the target. That could come in handy.

“Oh, well,” I said, “I’m sorry. The magic in my hand seemed to have a mind of its own.”

Now that I’d finally given Amako payback for that harassing she’d given me, it was time to get into using this new magic. Amako was glaring at me, but I shrugged it off and walked to an area about ten meters away where there was a target.

“So if I *move* the magic with enough force, I guess I can make it fly?” I asked myself.

I pushed my palm outward and envisioned the ball flying from my hand. Controlling magic was a matter of imagination, feel, and practice. It wasn’t going to be like the way I usually used my magic.

Still, the magic bullet fired from my hand with a unique bursting sound, just as I expected. I couldn’t help but let out a cry of success at the sight of my first healing bullet.

The shock and surprise came quickly—the magic ball had fired from my hand, but it slowed considerably and was just creeping along by the time it got to the

target.

I tried it a few more times but the results were the same—the healing magic slowed down after it fired.

“Looks like firing magic isn’t your specialty,” said Amako.

“You mean you can be *bad* at this?”

I wasn’t good at firing magic—it felt like a fatal flaw. The first part of it was great, but . . . just the instant that it left my hand.

Looks like I might have gotten my hopes up all for nothing.

“Oh. Wait a second,” I said, realizing something.

There was no reason that I had to be standing still when I fired my magic. If I didn’t have the skill to fire magic, then there was no way I was going to get any better by trying to master it like everyone else did. I would just have to go about it my own way until I was good enough to use it in a live situation.

And going about it my own way meant . . . leaning on my strength.

“Usato,” said Amako, “this is a matter of talent. Skills. You’re better off giving up—you’re already strong enough.”

“But we haven’t tried everything, Amako.”

“What?”

I formed another ball in one hand, then grabbed it with my other hand, leaned back, and wound up my arm, ready to pitch.

“I’m too stubborn to give up just because it’s a matter of talent!” I shouted.

When I’d gotten to a full stretch, I threw the magic ball at the target.

“Take this!” I shouted.

The magic ball sped out of my hand and . . . *almost* slammed into the target I was aiming for. Instead, it missed the target and flew straight into another without slowing down a bit. Healing light scattered into the air around it.

Damn, I missed the target. Then again, I never put much effort into pitching back home. Guess a low accuracy rate is just how it goes—just another skill I'll have to hone.

I let out a breath and looked at the area that I'd hit with my healing magic. It was about twelve meters away, and I had a feeling I could hit targets just a little further away than that. The magic balls didn't have any weight, so it wasn't likely I'd be able to throw them too far with just the power of my arms.



“This is going to take some work,” I said.

“Wait,” said Amako. “Wait wait wait. This is all weird. All wrong. How do you throw something that doesn’t weigh anything?”

“It’s my own unique move: the healing bullet.”

I ignored Amako after that because she was staring off into space, chanting, “So wrong so wrong so wrong.” She was like some kind of metronome. I turned my attention back to Nack. He was still running with Blurin, but he stumbled and lost his balance, then began to fall forward.

“Ah . . .” I muttered.

It was only natural that it was going to happen, given his pace. I kept my eyes on him as I kicked off the ground, covering the distance between us in an instant and catching him before he fell.

“You okay, Nack?” I asked.

“I . . . I’m sorry . . .” he managed between heaving breaths.

He wasn’t out of magic power yet, which meant that he was simply exhausted to the point of being unable to focus on using his healing magic. I put a hand to Nack’s back and ran healing magic through his body. He was still huffing and puffing, but the color was returning to his face.

“I guess running and using healing magic at the same time is pretty tough, huh?” I said.

“Yeah. I can do it, but . . . the moment I lose concentration, it’s gone . . .”

“It’s all good. That will come with time. I didn’t learn it overnight either, so there’s no need to rush. We’ve still got three days.”

The other way of looking at it, of course, was that we *only* had three days left. If worse came to worst, we could change tactics—Nack would heal himself only when he was injured and at other times rely on his stamina and focus on evasion. Unfortunately, that would make him a sitting duck whenever he needed to heal himself.

Nack was doing the best he could. He was so devoted to his training that he was putting off his schoolwork. He was serious and diligent. But no matter how serious or how hard he tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that things could still go horribly wrong.

I was lost in thought about what I could say to encourage him when I heard him utter something with the sound of surprise and look over at the entrance to the practice grounds.

I turned to see what he was looking at and saw a girl with a unique set of pigtails. She let a smile creep across her face as she saw Nack leaning on me for support.

"Mina . . ." I muttered.

Just as I was getting worried that she might try to train at the same practice grounds, she gave Nack one more glance, then turned on her heels and walked into one of the school buildings.

"Did she just come to tease you?" I asked.

Perhaps the whole point was showing off her confidence—letting Nack know that she wasn't going to do anything special and she was still going to win. Whatever the case, I didn't appreciate it. I cooled my temper and put the now fully healed Nack back on his feet. He put a hand to his face and turned away from me.

“She mocks me. She berates me . . . But I can’t fight back . . . She’s better than me at magic and everything else.”

“Nack, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“But I *am* worried. It wasn’t like that before I came here. She wasn’t the sort of person to go that far.”

So Nack knew Mina before she started bullying him? And if they knew each other, why did she even start bullying him in the first place?

“Everyone changed the moment my healing magic affinity was revealed. Everything was different. I don’t even want to be here, but I don’t have any place else to go.”

No place to call home?

I tilted my head, confused, but Nack just went on talking. I saw something sad in him as he went on, like he was expunging the words.

“Usato, will I really get stronger doing this training? Can I really beat her? Mina? Can I really . . . Can I . . .”

Nack realized where his words were taking him, and he dropped into silence. It took a moment for him to gather himself and speak again.

“I’m sorry. I’m talking nonsense. Just forget I said anything.”

Yeah, not happening, Nack. I heard it—the hint of a problem so much deeper than just fighting Mina.

“I’m grateful for all your help, Usato. But all we’ve done these last two days is run . . . I know it’s rude to doubt you, but . . . I don’t see the point of this.”

“Now—” I started but quickly put a hand over my mouth.

If you’ve got time for your wishy-washy, wimpy whining, then you’ve got time

for training.

I couldn't believe it. The words felt so natural they almost flew straight out of my mouth.

*Whoa. Rose really **has** been a bad influence on me.*

Showering Nack with such cruel words when he carried such a burden was beyond cold-hearted. I took a deep breath and purged each monstrous word from my brain. I thought of something kind and encouraging to say instead.

"It's not about whether you can or not—you *will*. Mina is totally looking down on you. That works in your favor. The more your opponent underestimates you, the more they leave themselves open. And to make sure you have the power to take advantage of that opening, we have to strengthen your body. There's no other way. So . . . give it all you've got."

"Give it . . . all I've got . . ."

Nack turned away from me and nodded. Then he took off running. I had a lot of different feelings swimming around in me as I watched him go, and I still couldn't get what he'd told me out of my mind. Nonetheless, I woke up Blurin, who was once again trying to slack off.

"Up and at 'em, Blurin," I said.

The bear growled.

"Come on, he's getting away," I muttered.

I forced the grizzly to his feet and gave him a push to start him running again. I watched Blurin take off after Nack, and I wondered if this was what Rose felt like when she watched training. To me, the sight of all the Rescue Team members at training was like watching monsters running in formation. But I was filled with a strange sensation as I watched the young Nack and Blurin continue

their laps.

“The teacher and the student, huh?” I muttered to myself as I walked to a place where I wouldn’t get in the way of their running.

*

Nack Agares. That was the name of the boy I couldn’t stand. The moment I saw him at the practice grounds, I turned and headed for my next class.

“Mina,” said one of the noble tagalongs in the group that was following me around, “why are you always so concerned about Nack?”

I couldn’t even remember her name.

“Huh? Why do you want to know?” I asked.

“Er, um . . . Because if you just want to let off some steam, there are other kids too, right?” she said with a giggle. “I mean, why set your sights on Nack when he’s got that demon of a healer with hi . . . Eep!”

I glared the girl into silence.

“Let me make this clear—this is *not* about letting off steam. If that’s what *you* want to go and do, then be my guest. Just do it on your own,” I snapped.

The whole group turned pale at my words.

“I . . . I’m sorry . . .” the girl uttered.

They were all cowards—all of them parasites clinging to the strong to make themselves feel strong too. If my dad hadn’t told me that I needed to make as many noble connections as I could while I was here, I would have rid myself of

them long ago.

“Nack and I used to play together,” I said. “Our parents were friends. We were called over to his house for tea parties all the time.”

But boy, were they boring—all of them just talking about the state of affairs and munching on cookies. As a kid, there was literally nothing more boring than the stuff adults talked about.

“Wait, so . . . Nack used to be a noble?!” asked a tagalong.

“He did. And he was a higher rank than all of you,” I spat.

The faces around me grew even paler.

“He was always gloomy and kind of flaky. If I hadn’t done him the favor of dragging him outside, he would’ve been one of those dull types that just holed up in their own rooms all of the time.”

Nack was someone I killed time with back when I was young. To be honest, it wasn’t actually very fun, but when I was young, it made me smile. Still, whenever I thought about the past, feelings welled up in my heart that I couldn’t stop and couldn’t go back to. Things were different for the both of us now, and there was no going back.

“He doesn’t stand a chance. Even if he tries to stand up to me, it’ll be nothing more than a bluff,” I stated.

But I wasn’t talking to my tagalongs. I was speaking those particular words for myself. People just didn’t change so easily. I knew that the healer was going to make Nack stronger. I honestly believed that the healer was the strongest person in the entire school after what he did to Halpha. So that guaranteed that Nack would get stronger. But none of it mattered if Nack himself couldn’t finish the training.

“As soon as it gets hard, he’s going to run away. He always does,” I said.

Nack wasn’t standing up to me of his own volition—he was still scrambling for some way to get out of the unbelievable circumstances he’d found himself in.

And so, he would run.

He would flee from the cold, hard reality that faced him.

*

I should have seen it coming. I should have noticed yesterday. Nack had been shaken—made fragile and worried when Mina looked down at him and laughed. I thought that if I just gave him the power to take her down, he’d be okay. I figured that would be the answer to his problems.

But I was wrong.

The darkness in Nack’s heart was even deeper and more severe than Inukami-senpai and I thought. But I didn’t realize it until the morning of our third day of training.

He wasn’t in the bedroom that Kiriha had let him stay in, so at first, I thought he’d just gone off to train by himself. But he wasn’t at the practice grounds either. Then I thought maybe he was so engrossed in his own training that he was running late. I crossed my arms and chuckled to myself. Blurin and I waited for an hour.

When Amako arrived, I finally realized the truth.

Nack had run away from training.

I ran away.

Training is too hard.

I don't even want to fight Mina.

Trying any harder is a waste of effort.

Everyone is just going to make fun of me.

I had plenty of reasons . . . or, really, plenty of excuses. But they were all pitiful, and they all reminded me of how weak and pathetic I was.

I had probably turned into this type of person after I awakened to my affinity for healing magic. But then again, maybe it was just my fate from birth to be pushed around and bullied.

I sat balled up in the darkness of an empty alleyway and groaned. I stared at the ground, agonizing over my own powerlessness. This was the place I always came to when it looked like Mina and her cronies were going to bully me. This place was a secret—my secret. It was the kind of place nobody knew about. It was the kind of place people forgot almost as soon as they saw it. Nobody came through here, nobody passed by, and so it was the place where I felt most at ease.

And just like always, it was the place where I wept. I sat in my alleyway, the alleyway that nobody ever came to, and I cried. Usually, I cried because of the bullying, but today was different.

“I’m . . . sorry . . . I’m so . . . sorry.”

I ran away. But not from Usato.

I ran from Mina.

I ran from the face I saw yesterday.

She looked down on me; she laughed at me. In that smile of hers, there was a naivety that did not know sympathy or compassion. It terrified me. I felt my body tremble. In an instant, that tiny flame of victory I saw in the darkness was extinguished.

I felt like I could improve. My life had been turned inside out the day that I woke to healing magic, but I thought that if I grew and got stronger, then everyone would see it and recognize it for what it was. Then I too could be as powerful as Usato.

It was those thoughts that kept me going through that nearly unbearable training. Even when I thought I'd pass out, I gritted my teeth and I pushed on. Even with a Blue Grizzly at my back, I pushed the fear away and I kept running. I did the very best I could just to make sure that Usato wouldn't yell at me like he yelled at Blurin.

But in the face of Mina's pure malice, I felt frozen.

What was the point of just running?

What difference does it make if I strengthen my legs?

Why do I have to use my magic while I run?

Why do I have to go through this just to fight a battle I can't win?

No.

No! No! No!

These were all just convenient excuses.

Usato's training was meaningful. It had a point. I could feel that it was working—I could feel how different I was compared to just a few days ago. My legs and my body felt lighter. I had so much stamina it was shocking.

All of that in just two days of training.

There was nothing wrong with Usato's training.

What was wrong was *me*.

It was time to train, but I was hiding out in an alleyway, being pathetic and crying. Crouched in a ball, lost in despair.

"I'm an idiot . . ." I whimpered. "A coward."

Fighting Mina terrified me. Losing to her would only make things worse. I couldn't even imagine how she could be crueler than she already was, but it wouldn't have surprised me if she was capable of being even more cold-blooded.

And that alone would have been fine.

If it was just me, that would have been fine. But now, if I lost, it wasn't just me who bore the consequences—Usato and that one hero would also have to answer to Mina.

"Why even put your hope in me?" I muttered. "I never asked for this."

If this was how it was going to be, then it was better not to cling to hope at all. It was better if only *I* was the one that got hurt—the one whose body healed all on its own. Then nobody would ever have to expect anything of me. Then I could keep clear of everyone—Usato, the hero . . . and that beastkin Kiriha who let me borrow a bed.

But the more I thought about it, the more I cried. I kept thinking about and remembering the last two days.

All that endless training.

But then there was kindness too. It had been a while since I felt that.

Even though I was useless, Usato put effort into helping me become stronger. Even though I was as worthless as healers got, he never abandoned me. He kept encouraging me no matter how many times I passed out.

When I was quite literally dead tired with no way home, he took me to Kiriha's house. I was in shock at the sight of it—humans and beastkin just chatting amongst themselves casually. Kiriha and Kyo didn't even seem to mind it.

But I was throwing those memories away as I sat in the alley, sobbing, just like I was throwing away what memories we might make in the future. I had let go of that sliver of happiness—a sliver that, for a moment, almost made me forget the memories of my own detestable family.

Now there was nothing left. Nothing at all.

Nothing but Mina's judgment. Her punishment.

But that was my fault for giving up. At the very least, I thought, I wanted to make sure that I didn't cause trouble for Usato and the others. I would pay whatever price I had to just to make sure they were kept out of it.

I stopped my sobbing and rubbed my eyes. It was time to go. I'd made my choice. I wasn't going to just face Mina as a broken-hearted healer with the bitter taste of defeat. I was going to choose the best future—a future where nobody got hurt but me.

"Time to get up," I muttered.

But just as I stood up, I heard a bright voice echoing through the alleyway.

“Ha! Found you!”

The moment I heard it, my knees weakened and I fell back to the floor.

“Huh?”

I turned, dumbfounded, and saw a young man in a coat so bright and white that it seemed completely out of place here in the alleyway. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew who it was by the voice and the way he held himself.

“Usato . . .”

The person I was least ready to face.

*

Nack was ridiculously easy to find.

That is to say, it was ridiculously easy because of Amako and Blurin.

To start things off, I had Blurin chasing Nack’s scent. Then we used Amako’s prescience once the search was underway. Blurin gave us a general location, and Amako dropped the pin on exactly where Nack was within it.

It was a shining example of teamwork . . . and I didn’t do a single thing.

In any case, we found Nack in no time, but we were still in a panic—he was sobbing and crying in an alleyway.

Oh. Was training really that unbearable? I really thought I was going easy on him, giving him breaks when Rose gave me none . . . Wait a second. Breaks aren’t generosity. They’re just part of training . . .

Anyway.

I could feel the reproachful glares of the fox girl and the bear, so I ushered them out of the alleyway to give me and Nack some time to talk alone.

I took a seat by Nack's side so I could see his reactions and speak to him in a light and easy tone. I was just thinking about how cold the floor of the alleyway was when Nack spoke.

"H . . . How . . . ?" he asked.

Nack seemed afraid to look at me. He kept his gaze on the floor.

"It's not that big a city, you know," I said. "It wasn't that hard for us."

Well, it would have been hard for just me.

Anyway.

Nack lifted his head and looked at me like he couldn't believe it, then let out a defeated chuckle.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I went too hard with the training, didn't I? I mean, I guess it really shows I've got a long way to go when it comes to teaching people, huh?"

"N-N-No! It wasn't your fault that I ran away. I . . . I just got scared. I'm not ready to fight Mina."

"Scared?"

So it wasn't that you hated my training? Then what are you doing hiding out and crying in a place like this?

But I didn't have to ask—little by little, Nack told me the reason himself. And as I listened, I realized that his fear of Mina was so much deeper than I had ever imagined. All it took was just a meeting of their eyes for his spirit and resolve to

shatter. This was no joke.

“Nack, what is it between you and Mina?” I asked. “Is she bullying you for more reasons than you just being a healer?”

Yesterday, I had pretended not to hear Nack, but if his trauma ran this deep, I felt I had to know more about it. Nack was hesitant, and he still wouldn’t look up, but then, slowly and timidly, he started to speak.

“We used to play together back in my hometown. Our parents were friends, and sometimes she would visit my house when her mom and dad came to visit. She would always drag me around with her.”

What? Are you telling me that you two basically grew up together? And wait, I’d already heard that Mina was from a noble family, but does that mean that you are too? But wouldn’t that mean that just like Mina, Nack is one of the students that the school has to protect?

Unfortunately, the reality was not like that at all.

“I grew up as a member of a noble family,” said Nack. “And before I came here, I lived the life of nobility.”

“So what happened?”

“The vast majority of my family awaken to an affinity for water magic. My father’s wife, too, was chosen for her water magic affinity. As you would expect, I was supposed to learn magic under a teacher that my father hired.”

“But you have healing magic.”

“Yes. On my ninth birthday, my little sister and I were set to discover our magical affinities. My father and mother both expected us to have water magic affinities. But in the end . . . that was true only of my sister.”

And based on where Nack is now, that means his parents . . .

“At that moment, my life changed. My parents became entirely different people. They were cold to me. I wasn’t allowed to see my sister anymore, even though we got along so well, and I wasn’t even allowed to go outside.”

“That’s awful . . .” I muttered.

All because of his magical affinity, Nack was no longer allowed the love of his own parents. I tried to picture how it must have felt for him at the time, but it just seemed so unbearable.

Nack laughed.

“It’s stupid, isn’t it? In the end, I was driven out of my own home and enrolled at Luqvist. The moment that happened, I no longer had a home to go back to . . . But at the same time, it was easier at Luqvist than it was at home. For a time, I thought I was really free.”

Nack chuckled in that same defeated way as before, but there was something so tragic about it. I thought about the first time we met and how panicked Nack looked as he ran off for class. Perhaps all of that came from a fear that he might lose the place that had become his last semblance of a home.

But even school had turned out to be anything *but* relief.

“And then Mina came along, right?” I asked.

“She’s always been selfish,” he said.

Still, why would she choose to bully an old friend?

“When we were kids, she always took me by the hand and dragged me outside with her. She kind of forced me, but at the same time—and I know this is a bit strange—back then, I didn’t hate it.”

“You were friends?”

“I don’t know about *that*. She was . . . She always just did what she wanted, and I got caught up in it,” said Nack with a chuckle. “When I think about it now, before I came here, I was always just tagging along and following her.”

Nack’s voice trailed off, leaving only his smile. But in the next instant, his smile took on a pained, sorrowful quality.

“I don’t know why Mina bullies me. Maybe it’s because of her parents. Maybe it’s because I’m a healer—it could be anything . . . but now, I just want everyone to leave me alone.”

I was silent.

Talk about heavy . . . Why am I surrounded by all these people carrying these huge burdens? Senpai is the same. Amako is the same—do I just attract that sort of person? I mean, I don’t want to. I don’t want to carry this weight—it’s too heavy! But all the same . . .

“But I *can’t* leave you alone,” I said.

The moment I heard about what was bothering Nack, I knew that leaving him alone, abandoning him, was not an option. And when I made up my mind, I see things through.

“Basically, Mina is an annoying former childhood buddy who still won’t leave you alone, right?”

“‘Buddy’ makes it sound cute, but I don’t think . . .”

“I also get that your parents were a pretty unpleasant bunch. And that you don’t have any place to call home except for Luqvist. So after this—I mean, after you graduate—when you have no choice but to leave, what are you going to do?”

“I, well . . .”

The world we lived in was a harsher one than even Nack could imagine. You could almost forget it if you lived somewhere as peaceful as Llinger Kingdom with its kind and just ruler. But other countries bought and sold slaves, and if you weren't careful on the roads between countries, you could get attacked by thieves or monsters. It would not be an easy place for Nack to navigate on his own with just his healing magic.

“I've . . . I've never thought about it,” he said.

Nack's face twisted and he looked down at his feet. The truth was dawning on him. I stood to my feet.

“You can always join Llinger Kingdom's Rescue Team,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I told you about the Rescue Team, right? Including me, there are four healers there. And it's comfortable . . . well, once you get past the insanity of the captain and all your rowdy monstrous teammates and their never-ending demon complaints.”

From what I'd seen over the last two days, with a little work, Nack would be on par with the kind of training that Felm was doing. And even if Nack could only heal himself, he could always train his body and join the ranks of the fierce and frightening, black-uniformed Rescue Team crew—though admittedly, I *did* worry about the influence those guys would have on him.

In any case, I was sure that Rose wouldn't turn him away.

“Coming to Llinger Kingdom is one of your options,” I said. “My friend, a healer, happens to be looking for an assistant too. So even if you don't want to do any more training than you've already done, you could still start over with

my friend.”

I was sure Nack would get along well with Orga and Ururu. Maybe his healing magic would even return to normal.

“W-W-Wait a second! Wh-What about my fight with Mina? If I don’t fight her, what happens to you?”

“Well, I don’t *have* to go and take her punishment, and I could always just intimidate her into silence.”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

I had already considered the possibility that I might have to renege on my promise. But it was still a last resort. At the end of the day, without her family’s status and power behind her, Mina was just another girl. It pained me—it *really* pained me—to think about it, but I was not against becoming a monster if I had to.

And in fact, I was all sorts of excited for it. I would probably even invite Inukami-senpai to come along.

“I will make sure you have a place to go home to,” I said. “So don’t worry. I mean, we can agree that getting bullied by people who think magic is some kind of fashion trend is stupid, right? You deserve to be somewhere where you can be happy—the kind of place where you can be yourself and make the most of your natural talents.”

Nack looked shocked at my words, but I went on.

“Right now, I’m on something of a pretty important journey, so I can’t take you all the way to Llinger myself. But I’ll write a letter for you, okay? It might take a little time though . . . I’m not really used to writing in this world yet.”

I took a breath and looked down at Nack. I’d kind of got the ball rolling before

he had a chance to take it all in, so I was a little scared that maybe it would be too much for him. Orga and Ururu? Okay, he'd be fine. But Rose? That was not as easy to foresee.

There was every chance she'd be all like, "Since when did you get so high and mighty you can just go around recruiting, huh?!" And then she would beat the heck out of me in a rage.

Is that what I have to look forward to upon my safe return? A severe beating? You know what? I'm just going to choose not to think about that for now . . .

"I know it's a lot to take in, but what do you want to do?" I asked him.

"Can I really go to Llinger Kingdom?"

"The choice is yours, Nack. I can only show you the way."

Just like what Rose did for me when I arrived in this world. Now it was my turn to do likewise for someone else. Nack looked up at me and I put out my hand. His eyes grew wet with tears and he rubbed at them with his sleeves, and then, timidly, he reached out for my hand . . . then stopped.

"I've decided," he said. "I'm going to fight Mina."

"You don't have to push yourself, Nack," I said.

But Nack shook his head, and he looked at me again with his red, puffy eyes. Gone was the dark gloominess that filled them before. It was replaced by the beginnings of an unwavering, confident light.

"As I am, I'm not worthy of going to the Rescue Team," he said. "And I won't be until I've settled things with Mina and I can look myself in the eye. And that's why . . ."

Nack's words trailed off, and then he grasped my hand in his own.

“Please help me train again, Usato!”

I felt like this was the first time that Nack and I, and our drive, were on the same wavelength. I mean, it could have been my imagination, but I still liked this feeling—it was like we both desired the same thing. And that was why I decided that I wouldn’t go easy on him anymore. Doing so wouldn’t help him, and it was disrespectful not to give him everything I had.

“Very well,” I said. “But no more Mr. Nice Guy. From here on out, I won’t let you quit, even if you beg me. If you faint on me, I’ll knock the consciousness back into you. If your legs scream in pain, I’ll just heal them. You will keep moving for as long as magical power flows through your body.”

“Huh? I-I mean, I’ll do it! No more complaints! No more whining!”

What was with that “huh?” though? I got the distinct feeling that our wavelengths went out of sync for a moment there. Well . . . let’s just ignore that.

“Then let’s get out of this dank, dark alleyway,” I said. “As soon as we get to school, your training begins anew!”

“Got it!”

Nack and I headed out of the alleyway and to the street where Blurin and Amako were waiting. Including today, we had three days left to toughen Nack up. We’d lost a little time today, but it wasn’t a big deal. Nack was full of enthusiasm now, and more than anything else, I was ready to give him no-holds-barred training. Admittedly, I didn’t like the idea of going full Rose, so to speak, but when I’d heard the resolve in Nack’s voice, I pushed that out of my mind.

But come to think of it, can I even commit to training like Rose? No! I must! Nack believes in me. And so it is my duty to respond in kind. I will discard any

unnecessary good will, pity, and sympathy. For Nack, I will make myself a monster. And I will not stop, call me what he may. I will give him everything I know, but not through the mind—I will beat it into his body. For the next three days, I will become the ultimate sadist.

“Ooh . . . did anyone else feel that chill?” asked Nack.

I looked at Nack curiously, wondering what it was that had suddenly made him turn pale.

Chapter 5: Digging for True Power! Welcome to Hell!

“Hey, sis,” said Kyo as we were walking home from class. “Have you heard that Usato is up to something again?”

What was it this time? Usato was the very definition of unpredictable.

“I wonder if it has to do with that racket he made this morning about Nack being missing?”

“I dunno. But word on the grapevine is he’s mad.”

“Mad?! Usato?”

He had a look that was terrifying, but I couldn’t imagine what he’d look like angry.

Well, we know he’s got to be training at the practice grounds, so why don’t we just check out how it’s going? Now that I’ve seen him running with a Blue Grizzly on his back, what’s there to be afraid of?

Fortunately, the practice grounds weren’t all that far, so Kyo and I walked over to them. Then we noticed students with strange and confused looks on their faces. It was weird, but we kept going and got to the entrance to the practice grounds. There were lots of students there, all staring at something.

I figured all the commotion could wait until after I’d found Usato and Nack, so I took a look around. That’s when I noticed a familiar hooded figure sitting in the shade of a tree by the entrance—Amako. I was just about to call out to her when I saw the look on her face—she was gazing off into the distance, looking defeated.

I’d never seen anything like it. I tilted my head in confusion just as Kyo tapped

me on the shoulder.

“Hey, sis,” he uttered.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Is that . . . ?”

Kyo had gone as pale as a sheet, and his finger trembled as he pointed. He looked the same as he did the day before yesterday, except now the scale of what we were looking at was completely different.

“Huh?”

Nack was sprawled across the ground, and Usato—yes, Usato!—had his foot on the boy’s back. There was a horrifying grin on his face.

“Is that what you call running?” he asked. “You think that’s going to make you into a first-class healer? You can still run, can’t you? Then get to your feet, you slouch. Do you have any idea how much time we’re wasting while you’re lying on the ground like this?”

“Y-Yes . . . sir!”

Usato’s foot glowed lightly with healing magic as he took it off of Nack’s back. Then he poked him with it. This was a completely different person from the Usato we knew until yesterday—this one looked supremely pleased with himself as he berated his student.

Nack scrambled to his feet with a whimper and took off running. Tears streamed down his face. Usato watched him with a glare that must have sent daggers into the young healer’s back. It was almost beyond description—Usato had a look of frustration on his face as he ground his teeth and tapped his feet. Beast-like teeth showed from between his lips as he watched his pupil like a hawk.

“Huh? What the? Eh? Who *is* that?” I asked.

“Sis, I don’t believe it either, but that’s . . . Usato.”

That’s Usato? It’s not some ogre that snuck into school? But he’s barely recognizable! Well, he looks the same, but it’s like there’s a monster inside of him! This is even crazier than the last time we saw their training! What happened between this morning and now?! He seemed so normal this morning!

I felt so confused. I still couldn’t believe that the person I was seeing was the Usato that I knew. But right then, his face grew even more terrifying as he stood at attention and then leaped from where he stood at a speed I could barely follow. I did my utmost to keep him in sight. Usato landed behind Nack, who was still running, and sent him flying with a gentle kick in the back.

Huh?! Since when was kicking allowed?!

Nack was sent sprawling across the ground with a groan of surprise. Usato cackled as he kneeled down beside the boy. He then took Nack’s head in a claw-like grip and forced him to his feet.

“Come on, Nack. Keep that magic power flowing,” he said. “I told you, didn’t I? Didn’t I tell you to focus on your magic power? And then you get a little tap in the back and it breaks your concentration . . . You *are* taking this seriously, right? Because if you are, Nack, then I would like for you to at least show me that you are taking this seriously.”

“B-But,” sputtered Nack, “I-I’m still not used to it . . .”

“Huh? It’s been two days, hasn’t it? You think that excuse is still going to fly? You realize that, unlike me, you started your training with some magical knowledge, right? That means you should be able to do this quicker than I did. Maybe I would have gone easy on you yesterday, but that was yesterday. I

won't accept 'I can't' as an answer anymore."

Usato's voice was as gentle as it always was, but there was also an edge to it that was so cold and unforgiving that it made me tremble. Usato was exuding such bone-chilling pressure that even just watching it sent cold shivers down my spine.

Nack tried to look away, his whole body wracked and shaking, but Usato wouldn't let him. He forced Nack to look at him, where he was waiting with a grin.

"Didn't you ask for this, Nack? Didn't you tell me that you wanted to send that snooty hag of a would-be princess flying so you could put an end to things?"

"I don't think I-I said it quite like that . . ."

"What?"

"I-I did! I said it!" cried Nack in a high-pitched squeal. "I want to send her flying! I want to beat her senseless!"

Even though it wasn't me on the receiving end, the conversation was so unsettling that it made me shudder. Even *Mina* would feel something like sympathy if she saw it. And in fact, all the students that had come to the practice grounds to train were at a complete loss for words as they watched.

"Right? That's what you want, right? But Nack, hear me out—are you really taking this seriously? From where I'm standing, you look like you're giving it your best. But in my training, I don't need you to give it your best."

A look floated to Nack's face like he no longer understood the words coming out of Usato's mouth. Even I had no idea what he was trying to say. What did he mean by that—he doesn't need him to give it his best?

Usato explained, "I don't hate the words 'try your best,' 'give it your best,' or

‘do your best.’ But you know what? This is not about that. The kind of training where you feel like you can survive by giving it your best? That’s not enough. That kind of thing only gets in the way of what *I’m* doing. How are you going to try your best when it’s all suffering and it’s all pain? You’ll just get sick of it. There is nothing more worthless than relying on abstract phrases to prop yourself up. So you don’t need them. You don’t need words of encouragement, words of fulfillment, or words of accomplishment. All you need is the results that you receive through the fruits of your labor.”

It all came out like a stream of consciousness from Usato’s mouth. But I felt like I grasped some of it at that moment. He was trying to say that you didn’t need to think about anything—you just had to become a slave to the endless training. It was pretty . . . Well, it was actually a *very* effective, if equally terrifying, way of thinking about it.

But if it went on, Nack would almost certainly run away. I mean, I knew that’s what I would have done. And I knew that’s exactly what all the students around us would have done too.

“So you’re not going to try your best,” said Usato. “You are just going to work so hard that you let go of that idea. Are you trying to make light of training at less than full power? Is that it? What we’re doing is very simple, isn’t it? All you have to do is stay focused and run. You don’t have to get used to it or anything like that. Have I asked you to do the impossible? Have I asked you to look left and right at the same time? No. So if you have time to come up with dumb excuses like ‘you’re not used to it,’ then get back out there and run.”

Nack whimpered as Usato went on.

“I am going to make you strong. And however injured and hurt you get through the process, I am going to heal you the best I can. But. If you are going

to take to it with a half-assed attitude, then I am going to let my foot off the gas because it's stupid to give you all of me if you don't give me all of you."

"No, I'm not . . . I'm not . . . half-assing it!"

"Then you give this everything you can, and when you can't give it any more, you keep on going. And if you can't do it on your own, I will find a way to do it with you."

With that, Usato released his grip on Nack's head. Then he stood up to full height and looked down at Nack. And though I couldn't see what Nack saw in Usato in that moment, from the look on Nack's face, I knew it was something.

"Now stand up," said Usato. "If you can't stand here, then you are the very definition of worthless."

Nack, it's probably okay to give up. Usato's training is the pinnacle of negligent and dangerous. And your body might survive thanks to your healing magic, but your mind will crumble. I mean, look at Usato—he overcame his training, but it twisted him.

Contrary to everything I thought, however, Nack rubbed at his teary eyes with a sleeve, then spoke up.

"I'll do it. That's all I have to do, right? Then I'll just do it!"

The young healer clenched his teeth and took off, staggering as he ran. His pace was steady, and though it was only slight, a wavering green aura could be seen around his body. He was taking to his training with a completely different attitude than the day before.

Nack let out a half-cry, half-roar as he ran. It was like he was holding on for dear life. And perhaps there was no more apt description of the boy than those very words at that very moment.

“Hmph. That’s the spirit,” muttered Usato. “Get at it, Nack.”

Usato let out a sigh of relief as he watched Nack running away, and the kindness returned to his face, along with a reassured smile.

Maybe you could have thought of it as a moving moment between the two of them, but for all of us watching, the problem had been solved in a way that seemed utterly unfathomable.

I was standing there, dumbfounded, when I became aware of a conversation between a boy and a girl nearby.

“Usato-kun is really serious about this. He’s practically turned himself into Rose,” said the girl.

“But no matter how much it seems like his personality changes, Usato is still Usato, huh?” replied the boy.

“It’s you two . . .” I uttered.

“Hm? Oh, hey, Kiriha. Did you guys come to see Usato too?”

It was the two heroes that had come with Usato to Luqvist—Suzune and Kazuki. Suzune knew me from a couple of days ago, and she gave me a casual wave. She wasn’t put off by beastkin in the slightest—in fact, her excessive interest in us kind of freaked me out.

“Oh, um. I’m Usato’s friend, Kazuki Ryusen,” said the boy, looking somewhat shy. “Senpai already told me about you guys.”

I introduced myself in return. Just like Usato and Suzune, Kazuki wasn’t bothered at all by beastkin. I knew it was a bit rude, but I couldn’t help wondering if Llinger Kingdom was a home to weirdos.

“Did you come to see Usato?” I asked.

“We did. We’d heard he was up to something extraordinary, so we were curious.”

Well, extraordinary was one word for it. I mean, he was a healer from Llinger Kingdom helping to toughen up Nack, a no-hoper. That alone was newsworthy, but the way Usato was going about it? *That* would have spread the news like wildfire.

“Is Usato always like that? Even in Llinger Kingdom?” I asked.

“Nope. This is the first time I’ve seen him like this,” said Suzune. “Wouldn’t you say, Kazuki?”

“Yep.”

So it was the first time for the heroes to see him like that too.

But why aren’t they all that surprised by it?

I couldn’t help but be curious, so I casually asked them why they weren’t shocked.

“Why? Because it’s Usato, I guess,” said Kazuki.

That didn’t make things any easier for me to understand.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when Usato makes up his mind to help, he goes full tilt. No matter how tough the situation, he will do literally everything he possibly can. It’s the very point of the Rescue Team, of which he’s a member. It was a lesson his instructor and captain, Rose, taught him.”

Kazuki talked proudly, as if he were talking about himself. Then he looked at his hands and went on.

“Usato saved our lives once. Senpai and I were critically wounded in the battle

against the Demon Lord's army, and we were literally on the brink of death. But that was when Usato came running. We're standing here today because of him."

"It's no exaggeration," added Suzune. "Usato saved me too. Well, come to think of it, he's always saving me in some way or another. I totally messed up my first practical training exercise and I dragged him into the whole mess. Actually, I also kind of annoy him a lot . . . Wait. He doesn't hate me, does he? I'm suddenly very worried . . ."

Suzune's shoulders slumped. Kazuki laughed.

"You're fine. Usato doesn't care about any of that," he said, turning to look at Nack again. "Nack asked Usato for help. So of course, Usato was going to go all out. And that means all the strictness and all the shouting. He wouldn't be there with Nack otherwise."

"All out, huh?"

After hearing Kazuki's explanation, I felt like I had a different view of Nack and Usato's conversation. He might whimper and he might complain, but Nack wasn't giving up now. Usato, meanwhile, had thrown away all mercy and all sympathy to help Nack grow. It wasn't exactly the easiest relationship to grasp, but I felt like I understood it a little better.

"Usato is giving it everything. And he's doing it to help Nack win," I said.

Ordinarily, if someone said they were going to prepare a healer to beat Mina in just five days, nobody would believe them. Almost everyone would pick Mina to win. That's how clear-cut the battle between Mina and Nack looked. But Nack and Usato were still trying—they still believed in victory.

"Are you two going to help with Nack's training?" asked Kyo, who had just

been standing behind us, silent until then.

Kazuki and Suzune thought about the question for a moment.

“Hm . . . I don’t think we’d be much help,” said Suzune. “It’s a bit embarrassing, but when it comes to physicality, Usato-kun is overwhelmingly stronger than us. That, and it’s probably not a great idea to overload Nack.”

“But I mean, I wish we *could* help,” added Kazuki.

I couldn’t help thinking about the way the three of them—Suzune, Kazuki, and Usato—seemed like such good friends. I was envious of that. I was jealous.

I turned away from the training—I hated that I felt that way.

*

That day, Usato and Nack got home just as I finished making dinner. Usato had carried Nack home on his back. As soon as Nack woke up to the food in front of him, he started shoveling it into his mouth.

“Ugh . . . it’s so good,” he uttered between mouthfuls. “I feel . . . so alive . . .”

I watched the young healer, tears and snot running down his face as he gulped down soup. I wasn’t sure if I should be happy or tell him off for the way he was eating. Usato, meanwhile, sat across from Nack and bellowed with laughter.

“You are going way overboard, Nack,” he said.

“Wait, you realize this is *your* fault, right?” said Kyo. “Also, why are you like a completely different person at training?”

“That’s because I channel my own teacher to re-create the experience,” said Usato. “Pretty convincing, no?”

“Don’t try and tell me it’s all an act! I can tell you love it!”

“H-Hey! I resent that! Don’t put me in the same group as my sadist teacher! Amako, say something! You’ve met the captain before, right?!”

“You looked like you loved it, Usato. That’s all I could see.”

“Ha!” shouted Kyo. “Even Amako could tell!”

“Amako . . . you betrayed me . . .” muttered Usato.

The table was nothing if not lively. Nack was oblivious to all of it. It was as though his body and mind were entirely focused on the act of eating. It was kind of worrying.

“You okay, Nack?” I asked.

“What do you mean, ‘okay’?”

“The way Usato worked you to the bone, you’re not scared of him?”

I couldn’t help wondering if training so hard made him sick of it all. Nack’s eyes grew a little wider at my words, and he looked a touch uncertain and troubled as he replied.

“He’s scary, yeah, but that’s because I asked him for it.”

“I see.”

Nack had been thinking about it too.

“Also, I think of Trainer Usato as a completely different person to Regular Usato.”

Maybe it was my imagination, but I felt like the light died in Nack’s eyes for a

moment when he said the words “Trainer Usato.”

“Oh. Is that so?”

At that point, Usato seemed to remember something.

“Oh, by the way, Nack,” he said. “I’ve got something for you.”

“For me? Is it training related?”

“You might not need it, but I wanted to give it to you all the same.”

Usato took a notebook from his pocket and passed it to Nack.

“What is this for?” Nack asked.

“It’s a diary. I recommend starting on it today. But you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Oh, so healers write diaries as part of their training, huh? I’m impressed.

“Wow,” I said. “Is it a way to track and record my progress?”

Usato laughed.

“No, nothing that cool. It’s more like a way to overcome how grueling the training is. The captain made me write one while I was training, and . . . well, because of the diary, I felt like I could get through the training without losing my soul.”

“Without losing . . . your soul?”

“It’s like a way to escape the reality of the endless training. But, Nack, you only have two days left, so you might not need it.”

I was silent. That didn’t sound like a diary. That sounded like something different . . .

Nack looked at the diary with some confusion. Seeing Nack like that seemed

to remind Usato of nostalgic old memories. Still, seeing the rough and clunky relationship that had developed between this teacher and student brought a smile to my face.

After dinner, everyone went to their rooms to wile away the rest of the evening while I cleaned up and prepared for tomorrow's breakfast. I was the only one who could cook, so it was safe to say that I handled all the food-related duties.

If I didn't keep on top of things, we might have found ourselves having to skip meals. On top of that, our funds for buying food were limited. So I had to manage that too. Fortunately, we weren't in a life-or-death kind of situation—we'd made friends with a beastkin who ran a shop. Kyo and I worked there on different shifts.

"Great, everything's ready," I said, stretching when the preparations were complete.

Well then, now what? Do I go back to my room and study? I have an early start tomorrow, so perhaps I'll wash up and just go to bed.

I yawned as the thoughts went through my mind and headed from the kitchen to the living room.

"Nobody here, huh?" I said.

I guess that wasn't strange. Everyone had just gone to their rooms. Come to think of it, Nack had taken that diary with him. Usato had gone to the trouble of preparing it for him, so I wondered if he was writing it. I was thinking about it as I went to my own room to get a change of clothes.

Right then, there was a booming sound from outside, like something bursting,

and I turned to the front door.

“Is someone outside?” I asked.

Maybe it’s a thief? But hang on—there’s nothing here worth stealing.

I took the gauntlet hanging on the wall and strapped it to my right arm. Then I slowly opened the door to peer outside. I saw a single figure standing in a space lit only by the light of the moon. I clenched my fist and readied my gauntlet. But as my eyes gradually got accustomed to the darkness, I relaxed—I could see who it was.

“Oh, it’s you, Usato,” I said.

“Hm? Oh, Kiriha? What’s up?”

“I feel like *I* should be asking *you* that.”

Quit making me worry all the time, would you?

“I got worried because of the noise,” I said. “What are you doing?”

“I was just practicing some magic.”

“At this time of night?”

Usually, Usato would be in bed asleep by now.

“I wanted to do a bit of light practice because it’s something I want to use in training tomorrow.”

“Healing magic? Haven’t you used that a bunch since you got here?”

I’d seen him myself, when Nack was running or he fell unconscious—that kind of thing. For whatever reason though, Usato flashed me a big, confident grin, and he started pouring magic into his right hand. The magic formed into a ball that sat in the palm of his hand.

This was not like the magic he'd used when he fought Halpha, which he covered his body with. This was more like the wind magic that Kyo and I used, which could be fired at a target.

Has Usato been practicing to use his healing magic as a projectile?

That made sense to me, but what didn't make sense happened next. Usato slowly gripped the magic ball, then raised it above his head and, with a grunt, threw it forward.

What the heck kind of a firing method is that?

It was completely nonsensical, and yet the ball blasted through the air and slammed into a wooden box in front of Usato, echoing with the same booming sound that I'd heard earlier. I was still staring, dumbfounded, when Usato turned to me with a proud smile.

As it turned out, Usato didn't have any talent when it came to firing his magical powers, so pitching it and throwing it was his workaround—basically, he was relying on his physical strength. Which, of course, made exactly zero sense—magic wasn't something you could wrangle control of with your muscles.

"Perfect timing though, Kiriha," said Usato. "Could you go and stand over there? I want to see if my magic is effective."

"No! I saw the force that thing had behind it!"

"It's fine though. It's healing magic."

"Healing magic or not, I'm not going to let you just throw something at me at that kind of speed! What kind of strength are you putting into that thing to make it fly anyway?"

"I dunno . . . arm strength, I guess?"

It's just as I thought. This guy's a literal monster.

I sighed.

"It's just been surprise after surprise since the day you got here . . ." I muttered.

"Surprise after surprise? Actually, yeah, there have been all sorts of surprises, huh?" he said.

First there was meeting him in town. Then there was when he came to my house with Amako. And then there was when he fought Halpha, when he started training Nack—Usato was completely and utterly unpredictable.

You couldn't even tell what he was going to do next.

"I always thought that humans, every single one of them, were cold and heartless," I said.

Beastkin were always looked at like oddities, all because we had ears and tails that made us different from humans.

"I've tried to just treat you like I would anyone else," said Usato.

"But even the fact that you can treat us like that is weird. To most humans, beastkin aren't even people."

"I don't know about that," he said.

"In this city—no, in this world—it's just common sense," I explained. "It's weird the way you can speak to us the way you do."

The moment I saw Usato's awkward reaction, I realized I'd said too much. He hadn't done anything wrong. I wanted to apologize to put things right, but before I could, Usato spoke.

"Common sense in this world . . . Well, I'm not even from this world," he said,

thinking back to the past. “So I don’t know what common sense is here.”

“Huh?!”

I couldn’t help shouting—Usato’s words were beyond unbelievable. If he wasn’t a human from this world, did that mean Suzune and Kazuki weren’t either?

“The reason I’m here is that I got caught up in the Llinger hero summoning that brought the two heroes to this world,” said Usato.

“Hero summoning?! Are you telling me that Suzune and Kazuki are heroes just like in the stories?” I asked him.

“Uh, yes. Is there some other type of hero that I don’t know about?”

Some other type of hero . . . Well, humans usually called other people heroes when they either earned their status on the battlefield or were otherwise appointed directly by the king. That’s how all the students here at Luqvist thought of heroes. And even though they were rare, people *did* exist who had earned the title of hero—but in the end, that’s all it was: a title.

But the heroes that Usato was talking about—Suzune and Kazuki—they were like the hero in the stories. That hero had been summoned hundreds of years ago, and that hero single-handedly beat down the demon armies and sealed away the Demon Lord.

And Usato had come from that same world. That made it so much easier to understand why he was so unnaturally strong. When I explained this to Usato, it looked like he understood.

“Ah, okay. So hero *does* have another meaning,” he said.

“But knowing that, I, at least, understand where your strength comes from now,” I stated.

Usato laughed.

“I’m not all that,” he said. “I only have a little more magic than the ordinary person—training is what made me.”

“Yeah, but that in itself is kind of the issue,” I said.

It was frightening to think that he didn’t have any special abilities but had nonetheless developed power that rivaled that of even the heroes themselves. When I thought about it, comparing Usato—who only had physical attacks—to heroes who could wield powerful magic should have been ridiculous in and of itself.

“Because I came from a completely different world, I don’t know what the standards of discrimination are here,” said Usato. “I mean, back in my own world, we don’t even have monsters or demi-humans.”

“But wouldn’t that make you even more afraid of us?” I asked.

It was surprising to hear that demi-humans and monsters didn’t exist in Usato’s home world, but that was all the more reason to think he’d have been creeped out to see someone like me or Amako for the first time.

“Not in the slightest,” said Usato, like he was swatting my doubts away.

“But our ears are different, and we grow tails—humans don’t. That, and our eyesight and sense of smell are several times stronger . . . Then we’ve got the strength that can crack rocks in half.”

“Oh, but I can turn rocks into dust too,” he quipped.

*Huh? I didn’t say anything about turning them into **dust**. Ugh, no. Can’t let myself get distracted.*

“But however you look at it, we’re more like monsters than we are like

humans,” I said, feeling the emotions well up in my voice. “There are monsters that speak human languages, after all! No matter how similar we look, humans and beastkin, we’re definitively different.”

“But then that makes me more like a monster too, doesn’t it? I use a different magic from other humans,” Usato said.

“Well, you *are* an ogre-like monster . . . I mean, you’re *like* a monster, but you’re a human.”

“You know, I really want to ask about the way you used the word ‘like’ just now, but let’s put that aside for a second,” said Usato, his eyebrow twitching as he crossed his arms and turned to face me. “In my eyes, you’re not that different from a girl who gets into animal cosplay.”

“Huh? What’s cosplay?”

“Oh no, I think I’ve been infected by Inukami-senpai. Forget I said that.”

“Uh, okay . . .”

Usato’s face went red, but he cleared his voice and composed himself.

“Kiriha, I can see that you’ve got worries you’re hefting around with you. But as far as I’m concerned, humans and beastkin and demons, they’re not that different. My point of view might be different from other people’s here, but I don’t think I need to fix that either. If you asked Inukami-senpai if she was afraid of beastkin, she’d probably say something like, ‘Afraid? What a dumb question! I can’t get enough of them!’”

I giggled at the sight of Usato changing the pitch of his voice to impersonate his friend. It was so strange—I’d been so suspicious of everything up until that point.

“What is that? Is that your Suzune impression?”

“Yeah, but you can’t say anything to her. She gets really embarrassed about this kind of thing.”

It dawned on me then that perhaps the worries I’d been carrying around for the past few days were quite simple at heart.

“Huh. I see . . .” I muttered.

For a while now, I’d given up any hope I had for human friendship. Now, I was scared to remember those feelings. After all the bad I’d seen in humans, I didn’t want to be betrayed, and I didn’t want to be abandoned if I grew to trust one. I did everything I could to not trust them, but I held conflicting feelings—part of me still hoped.

“I’ve just built it up way too much over this time, haven’t I?” I muttered.

It was the second time that Usato had made me realize certain feelings smoldering within me. All this time, I couldn’t be honest with myself. I carried doubts and suspicions, but now I understood my own feelings and the human called Usato.

“It’s just as I thought,” I said. “You’re a weird one. In fact, you go beyond even the meaning of the word.”

“Hey, go easy on a guy, would you?”

“I mean that as a compliment. It’s because you’re weird that Amako found you. It’s because you’re weird that Nack has found the courage to confront Mina. And it’s because you’re weird that . . . I can talk to you like this.”

“Well, it doesn’t *feel* like a compliment, but . . . whatever.”

I’d realized so late, and yet, I still felt like there was time. There was still time for what I’d yearned for so long—the pure hopes that I’d carried when I first came to this place.

A human friend.

And for starters, I'd do my best to be the sort of person this weirdo could think of as his friend.

Chapter 6: Death Match! Nack vs. Mina!

Training Diary

Day Three

Usato told me to write a diary so . . . well, that's what I'm doing.

Today was the day that I was reborn.

It might look cool written down like that, but in reality, I was just running in fear from Mina until Usato saved me, and now I feel like I'm finally starting over. At the same time, I'm still worried—I don't know if it's really okay for me to join the Rescue Team, like Usato suggested.

Wouldn't a guy like me just cause trouble for everyone? That's the only thing I can really imagine. Then there's the fact that I keep hearing about Usato's terrifying teacher—if she's the sort of person that can make someone like Usato scared, then she's got to be seriously scary.

I think I'll write about the training.

It's even rougher than the bullying.

I finally understand—until yesterday, Usato was going really easy on me. He calls his behavior acting and pretending, but I'm convinced that it's just another side of who he really is. The way he barks and shouts, and how even when I'm not looking, he grinds his teeth and exudes that fierce displeasure—you can't

tell me that's acting. Every time I fail, I'm bowled over, then berated, then trodden on and healed. That's not something you just mark down to acting.

He's a monster when we train, and he's a human when we don't—that's how I've come to see him.

Jeez, even just writing this is making my hands shake. But it's not a problem with my body. In fact, I feel great—my healing magic is super effective. This is fear. The two masks of Usato cover me in a shroud of uncertainty and doubt. Behind the smile of one, the other is planning the following day's training schedule. When I think of that, my hands shake. If I slip up and offend him when he's in a good mood, how is that going to reverberate into my next training session?

Aw man, now my legs are shaking too.

It's useless. I've lost all will to write.

That's it for today's entry.

Day Four

I'm sorry I'm

so

inexperienced

I fainted in the hallway with my diary in hand. I woke up when I heard Kyo's panic. I then pulled myself together and decided to keep on writing.

Today's training started with Usato shouting at me. Apparently, my durability level is too low. Well, they're at standard human levels, but I may as well be made of paper compared to the sort of healer image that Usato has in mind. He said that if the Rescue Team captain were to punch me, she'd turn me to dust.

So today, on top of me doing my magic-casting practice, we also worked on my durability. I was finally at the point where I could feel it—I could feel the magic in me while I ran. I really thought I was at the point where I could use it in a stable fashion.

But I was wrong.

I was so, so wrong.

I think yesterday I wrote something about being reborn, but I should correct that.

I haven't even gotten to the starting line.

The training got even harder.

The berating got even worse.

I was feeling positive before training started, but during training, I thought I was going to die.

The new training consists of me dodging the magic that Usato throws at me. Usato's thinking was like this: even if your durability is trash, it doesn't matter as long as you don't get hit.

And yeah, that's true, but . . .

Usato uses his healing magic all wrong.

Why is he throwing healing bullets?

How do you even throw healing bullets in the first place?

Like seriously, he's some other species that was mixed up at birth.

And he throws the magic much faster than anything Mina has ever cast.

What the heck does he think I'm going to be fighting?

The moment one of those bullets hits me, I go flying. Then I hear Usato bark something like, "You're supposed to dodge it!" It's just terrifying.

It's healing magic, so it doesn't hurt, but the impact still feels like being punched very hard—it's crazy.

But then again, I'm a healer too. Maybe I can do that.

Let's give it a shot.

It's impossible.

Magic just isn't something you're supposed to throw. It doesn't weigh anything. The moment he threw his first healing bullet, I knew that nobody but him could get that to work.

Seriously, just how strong is that guy?

Except for the few breaks we took while Usato was recharging his magical power, I was dodging healing bullets from morning to night. This training is seriously insane. And I don't get tired because the bullets he throws are filled with healing magic, so they heal as they hit, which means I can keep moving. Also, and I hate to admit this, most of them hit me dead on, so it's like my body is coursing with healing energy. I can feel my own magic much more than I could yesterday too.

But all that magical power wears Usato down. By the end of training, he said he was almost running on empty.

For me, more than my body, it's my heart that feels worn down. I remember hearing in class that a person's mental state can have an effect on their body. I really feel like that's happening to me.

I'm not interested in anything. I don't care. I can't even bring myself to care about this diary. I can't even care about my fight with Mina. All I can think about is how I'm going to survive another day of training.

I must be in a deep mental place right now.

It's useless.

I don't know why, but it's useless. All of it.

I'm going to sleep.

Here ends today's diary entry.

Day Five

Today was the final day of training.

All I could think about was training. That's it.

I stopped caring about the people I could see watching me and the people who were bullying me. None of it matters.

Run, go flying, get yelled at, go flying, go flying, run, go flying, go flying, get yelled at, dodge, go flying, go flying, run, go flying, go flying, get yelled at, yell back, go flying, try to hit Usato, get kicked and sent flying, go flying, run, dodge—it's that for the whole day.

I can count the times I dodged Usato's magic bullets on one hand.

I heard him mutter, "Did I go too far?" For me, it was more than enough.

When training ended, I couldn't believe who came up to talk to me. It was Usato's friends and the heroes of Llinger Kingdom, Kazuki and Suzune. It seemed as though Usato had arranged for them to come along and give me a little advice.

Kazuki told me that it's okay to be afraid of fighting, but it's important to stand up for yourself. He said that it wasn't a bad thing to be afraid of Mina, and it wasn't bad to run away, but at the same time, it's important that you overcome your fears and face them. I could see and feel the strong determination in his eyes.

Suzune told me that even nobles can live free. She comes from a family similar to my own. She said it's important to live true to yourself and not to get tied down by all of that stuff. Even if it's tough now, you have to hold on to hope because a path forward will reveal itself.

The two heroes were so much easier to talk with than I'd imagined. They were both really kind. When I saw them talking with Usato, it really did look like they were all good friends.

I have nothing but gratitude for all of them.

Usato,

Thank you once again for helping me when I was so low.

Mina,

Prepare yourself.

This is not about revenge, and it's not about a grudge.

This is for me—it's so I can remove the chains you tied me down with and move on.

It's so I can stand alongside Usato as a member of the Rescue Team.

Although I never told Usato this, I will say it now. It's so I can finally let go of my parents and the horrible family I was once a part of.

I want to live a life in which I am not tied down by the idea of magic being "good" or "bad."

And to that end, I . . .

I will not yield.

I will defeat Mina.

I will make use of everything I've built up over the course of this training, and I will send her flying.

*

That was as far as I read before closing the diary I'd found in front of Nack's room. I had a thought. I wondered if healing-magic training was the stuff that turned humans into beasts. Nack was so weak and timid just a few days ago, but now he had become something entirely different. Now he was someone

befitting of his sharp, strong gaze.

“Will everything work out?” I muttered.

Nack had already left for the battlefield where he would meet Mina. But I couldn't even imagine it. I couldn't imagine the meek Nack that I knew roaring at Mina as he ran in to punch her. But then, when I thought of him going through a transformation the way that Usato did . . .

“No, it'll be fine. Of course it will. If anything happens, Usato will stop it.”

Or so I told myself, nodding profusely so as not to admit to reality.

I put Nack's diary on the desk in his room and headed off toward school, where Kyo was waiting.

*

It was the day of the fight.

Amako and I had just parted ways with Nack. We stood in front of the school gates, which were crowded with students. I'd left Blurin at the stables. There was no way I could bring him to a place with so many people.

When I told Amako why I hadn't brought the Blue Grizzly, she was shocked. “I can't believe you were so considerate,” she uttered. Her attitude was regrettable, but being the kind-hearted man that I was, I was willing to let it go after giving her a sharp, healing flick to the forehead.

Amako grabbed her head in agony.

“Usato!” someone said.

“Oh, you’re already here,” said another.

I ignored Amako’s vengeful gaze and turned to find Inukami-senpai and Kazuki walking toward us. We’d been waiting for them. They both seemed worried about Nack, so I invited them to come along and watch.

“Hey there, Usato-kun, and, uh . . . Amako? What’s up?” asked senpai.

“Usato is a bully!”

Seeing that Amako was trying to involve senpai, I decided to shut her down.

“Good morning,” I said. “Don’t mind her, senpai. She’s still half-asleep.”

Kazuki waved a hand in greeting.

Damn, that guy is just blindingly good-looking.

“How’s Nack-kun doing?” asked senpai.

“Great. He’s fully recovered from training, and I think he’s in a good place, mentally.”

Nack was ready to fight. He’d settled his resolve and was set on defeating Mina. I was admittedly a little worried that he was *too* enthusiastic, but he was in good shape, so I had no complaints.

“Hey, where’s Welcie?” I asked.

“She said that she has some business with Gladys,” said Kazuki. “Probably has to do with the letter we brought here.”

I nodded. That made sense—it *had* been one whole week since we delivered it. It was probably about time that the school had come to a decision. I had been kind of nervous and worried that an answer might come while we were in the middle of our training. I was glad we managed to get this far without any interruptions.

“We’re a little early, but let’s go, shall we?”

Five days of training—just enough to get Nack into fighting shape. There was nothing more that I could do. Everything was in Nack’s hands now.

“Amako, what are you doing?” I said. “Keep up.”

“Damn you . . . I’ll never forgive you . . . Never . . .”

Talk about an overreaction for a little flick in the head.

Amako was still glaring at me, so I grabbed her under my arm and walked alongside Kazuki. It might have looked a little surreal to see me carrying a hooded girl under my arm, but I was more than used to the weird looks. I’d been showered in them ever since Nack’s training had started.

“Usato-kun, will Nack-kun be okay?” asked senpai, flashing something of a suspicious glance at Amako under my arm.

“He’ll be fine. I did everything I could.”

“I only watched from a distance, but that sure was some training you put him through. Even *we* were worried about all the people staring at you two.”

I laughed awkwardly. I didn’t want people seeing me go full Rose on Nack. I flashed a smile to shrug senpai off and looked around. The moment I did that, all the students around me turned away to avoid looking me in the eyes.

What’s up with the reaction? Do they think I’m a thug or something?

“Then again, to get Nack into that kind of shape with such limited time, there wasn’t any other way, right?” asked Kazuki. “Right, Usato?”

“Uh . . . yep. I just did things my way. With running and magic bullets . . .”

“My way. I guess that’s *one* way of putting it,” muttered Amako.

Quiet, fox-kin!

Kazuki was smiling, so I smiled back while I got my revenge on Amako by shaking her with my arm.

Atonement through dizziness!

While I was meting out this punishment, however, I felt senpai's gaze digging into me.

"You two seem awfully close," she said.

"Huh? Well, we've traveled together a lot, and . . . what's with the stare?"

I had a feeling that things were about to get bothersome.

"Oh, I see. *Together*, huh?"

Senpai suddenly turned toward us, her fingers interwoven and her expression all flirty.

"Way to make a girl . . . jealous," she said.

The adorable words were a perfect match for one as beautiful as senpai. Back in our old world, that gaze would have caused anyone to faint—boys and girls alike. I wouldn't have been any different . . . that is, if it was senpai from our old world.

"Oh, is that so?" I said. "Hey, Kazuki, what did you get up to while Nack and I were training?"

"Hey!" uttered senpai.

You can try all the cutest gestures in the world, but unfortunately, I know who you really are, and that will never change.

"Well, I was practicing a lot to make my magic bullets easier to control,"

Kazuki explained. “You remember the magic I did at the demonstration? The biggest problem right now is how much I have to concentrate to use them.”

“Man, I wish I could fire off magic like that,” I replied. “But you know, maybe if you look and think about it from a different point of view, you’ll find a surprising answer to your problem?”

Kazuki and I were chatting and walking when I felt someone grab ahold of my shoulder.

“Excuse me!”

What is it this time?

“What kind of a reaction was that?!” demanded senpai. “Have you no heart?”

“How rude,” I said. “I’ll have you know that when it’s not a calculated move, I’m head over heels. Instantaneous love, even.”

“I’ll tell you what’s rude! Brushing me off with a simple ‘Oh, is that so?’ I am a beautiful young woman! You’re supposed to swoon, get embarrassed, that kind of thing!”

“Perhaps you should consider that it is *you* who is in the wrong for having that mindset,” I quipped.

That said, however you look at it, she really is a beautiful young woman. But I’m not so stupid that I’ll fall into such an obvious trap. Besides, seeing her all vexed and frustrated like that is just so adorab—wait. I’m not going to go there. I think putting on the Rose act for so long has brought out the sadist in me.

I took a deep breath and broke free of senpai’s clinging grasp.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “You’re cute. You’re so cute. I think my heart stopped. That’s what you wanted, right? Cool, let’s go.”

Senpai groaned and her cheeks flushed red.

“Ugh, the humiliation . . .” she muttered. “It’s like you’re even more of a sadist than you used to be.”

She walked on and I followed her. Kazuki laughed as he watched the back-and-forth between us.

“You two get along like a house on fire. Just watching you two puts me at ease.”

I didn’t try to deny it.

“Yeah, and being together puts me at ease too.”

Usually, they called me twisted, so at times like this, I wanted to be honest.

But damn, now my face is all hot. I really have to stop speaking out of character like this.

I covered my head with my hands so that Amako couldn’t see me.

“What’s wrong, Usato?” she asked. “Are you sprouting horns or something?”

“Not another word out of you,” I said.

Just what kind of a monster did this girl think I was? She knew as well as I did that humans didn’t grow horns.

*

There was a huge number of students gathered at the practice grounds. In the center of the grounds, two students were already in the midst of a match while everyone watched on around them.

One of them let loose a battle cry.

In reply, the opponent shouted, “This time, victory is mine!”

I let Amako back down to her feet and watched the match while we looked for a place to sit.

“Wow. It’s just like I thought it would be . . .” muttered Senpai.

The two students were equipped with wooden swords. The swords flew through the air along with shouts and magic spells. Senpai looked on with great interest, then turned to me as if something had just sprung to mind.

“So this is what a fight between mages looks like,” she said. “It’s different from when you and Halpha fought.”

“Well, there aren’t many mages who rely on physical abilities the way I do. I think the match we’re watching is what it’s supposed to look like, no?” I said.

Halpha used martial arts and his magic sight to predict his opponent’s movements. Then there was me—a healer who relied on his physical strength to brawl to the death. It was a bad idea to judge us as the standard for mages.

“Seems there are a number of ways to blend magic and weapons for battle,” said Kazuki. “But there’s nobody out there ready to go at it empty-handed like you.”

I laughed.

“Well, I mean, I’ve just never needed a weapon, you know?”

And now that I had a new technique—my own healing bullets—I had no need for swords and the like. With my modern-day sensibilities, and the way I felt when I tried fighting that snake with a wooden spear . . . I just knew that weapons weren’t my thing.

We walked on, avoiding the curious eyes of nearby students, and looked for a place to sit.

“Why hello,” said Halpha, who happened to spot us. “You’re all together today.”

He approached us with an easy smile.

“Hey, Halpha.”

I’d seen him around a few times while I was training Nack, but this was the first time I think I’d talked to him since we started.

“You know, I love events like this one, so I came to watch,” said Halpha. “Actually, I’d love to have competed myself, but when I finally found an opponent, he withdrew from the match.”

Halpha laughed. It seemed clear to me that he dropped out because Halpha had a tendency to go right for a person’s weak points. When we’d sparred a while back, he had me in a few tight spots too.

“Oh, I, uh . . . I see.”

“This looks like a good spot to watch,” said senpai, “but oddly enough, it seems completely devoid of any students.”

She was right. There was nobody else around.

“Oh, we can thank Usato for that,” said Halpha. “It’s his *presence*.”

I got the sneaking suspicion that he was implying the surrounding students had run away because I’d arrived.

But that can’t be right, can it? If anything, they’re all afraid of Halpha, right? Him and his bloodthirsty fighting style. That has to be it.

I looked around, and yet again, the students looked away from me and kept

their distance.

“Yeah, I don’t know if you’re right, Halpha,” I uttered.

Halpha laughed.

“Looks like we’re two of a kind, Usato.”

There was something creepy in Halpha’s tone of voice.

“That doesn’t feel like a compliment,” I said.

Halpha chuckled. His head was facing down slightly so that his eyes were hidden by his bangs. He looked at some of the students watching us from afar—their faces immediately drained of color as they stepped backward.

“As an overseer, students tend to keep their distance from me,” Halpha explained. “That’s why I always try to keep smiling. Unfortunately, smiling’s not so easy.”

“Admittedly, I can relate to that,” I said.

I thought back to when I tried to calm Kiriha down with a smile and it only had the effect of scaring her even more. Even now, I still couldn’t work out why she’d reacted the way she did.

“It’s not that hard—it’s just that a smile without a heart scares people,” Amako muttered under her breath.

“What was that, Amako?” I asked.

With a squeal, she turned away.

“Who might that be, Usato?” asked Halpha suspiciously.

Amako quickly shuffled behind me to avoid his gaze.

“Hm? Oh, she’s just a member of our traveling party,” I replied.

“Her magic is similar to my own, and yet . . . different. I see white magic gathering around her eyes. Is it perhaps a more advanced type of magic sight? Actually, I remember seeing her at Nack’s training. Who is she?”

“Um . . .”

“Oh, if you’d rather not say, that’s fine,” said Halpha. “I know the hardships of having this kind of magic.”

I was glad Halpha could read the room. Amako’s prescience was unique to beastkin, which meant her cover could be blown in an instant if someone knew about her sort of magic.

All the same, I was once again impressed by Halpha’s magic sight. One look at Amako and he’d gotten a pretty good bead on her magical abilities.

“Oh, on a different note, Kiriha asked me to pass a message to you if I saw you,” said Halpha.

“A message?”

“She said it would look bad for you to be watching with a beastkin, so she and Kyo will be cheering for Nack from elsewhere.”

“Oh, she didn’t need to worry about anything like that. But thanks for letting us know, Halpha.”

“Think nothing of it. I was happy to even have a message to pass on—she usually does everything she can to avoid relying on the help of humans. Perhaps she’s had a change of heart recently,” said Halpha, smiling at me.

So Kiriha and Kyo were watching from somewhere else. Unlike Amako, even with their hoods on, they couldn’t hide from their own classmates. I was a bit sad that we couldn’t watch the match together, but I guess there was no other choice.

When was Nack's match going to start? I guessed it had to be soon because I hadn't heard of too many people competing at this particular event. With the current match coming to an end, I took a look around at the practice grounds and spotted Nack and Mina lined up at the entrance near the school buildings.

"Oh, there he is," I said.

"It's Nack-kun," said senpai, her eyes lighting up. "And it's that Mina girl too."

I'd been worried that Nack would be shaken by the mere sight of Mina and it would affect his movement in their match. But based on what I saw now, it looked like my fears had been misplaced. Mina was openly talking to Nack with an arrogant look on her face. Nack wasn't fazed in the slightest. Instead, he stared straight ahead at the field upon which they'd be fighting.

It seemed like after all our training, one side effect was the emergence of this gutsier side of Nack, which I figured was good. A part of me still thought maybe I went too hard on him, but if the results were solid, then it was fine.

"Now all that's left is to defeat her," I said.

A bell sounded to mark the end of the current match. Cheers rang out as the two students left the practice grounds and were replaced with Nack and . . .

"Hm? Mina's carrying a shield," I muttered.

I hadn't noticed it until she was standing in the middle of the practice grounds, but she had a big silver-white shield on one of her arms. It was so big, in fact, that she could probably hide her whole body behind it if she had to.

"I figured she was going to bring a weapon of some sort with her, but I never imagined a shield," I said.

I could tell by the smug look on her face that she felt safe with some defensive equipment at the ready. But, if she underestimated Nack, then she

was in for a rude awakening. Healing magic wasn't just about healing people, and Mina was about to learn the true meaning of that firsthand.

Nack didn't have the ability to heal other people, so I'd never had the chance to teach him the Healing Punch. If Mina slipped up, his punches were going to hurt enough to even injure her.

But that's why I'm here. So don't hold back, Nack. None of those people who laughed at your magic will ever make fun of you now. Not after you show them the results of your five grueling days of training.

*

"Someone's gotten an attitude," said Mina.

She stared at me from the middle of the practice grounds. Our match was just about to begin.

I'd watched the match between two seniors that was before ours. At the end of their hard-fought battle, they shook hands and praised one another.

That had been my dream—to fight against someone using ordinary magic. But that dream was never going to come true. Nonetheless, I was standing here now with my anything-but-ordinary healing magic.

In the stands, I spotted a blindingly white coat amongst all the students—Usato.

"However hard you've trained, nothing has changed," said Mina. "You were still abandoned by your dad, you were separated from your beloved little sister, and the difference between our magic is like heaven and earth."

Yes, I had a sister.

My worthless parents kept me and my sister separated. I was certain of that even now. She lived a happy life surrounded by their smiles. But I wasn't jealous. Until the very end, I thought of her as my only family.

I wondered what my parents had told her. It was probably whatever was most convenient—something along the lines of me doing my best, all on my own, somewhere far away. She might have no idea why it was so important to them that they hide my existence from the world, but it didn't matter anymore.

"Mina," I said.

"Oh, so finally you decide to respond. Fine, say what you will."

"I don't care anymore. Not about the nobility, or going back to them, or about revenge against you."

"So even though this place is still your only chance to try again, you're saying you'll throw away your title?"

"Don't talk nonsense. You said it yourself: my dad abandoned me. The moment I was brought here, to this school, my family and I became strangers."

"So tell me then, why stand here before me? You know how painful my magic gets. And let me tell you, until now, I've been holding back. But you're not *that* stupid. You already knew that, didn't you?"

That I did. Sure, Mina hurt people for her own pleasure, but she'd never turned her burst magic on me for real. Until now, what she'd cast on me simply tested the limits of human pain.

"Actually, I never needed to fight you. But I was shown a path, and if I want to walk it, I can't do it as the person I am now. I've seen the shape of the man I respect and look up to, and I now know that I wish to stand at his level. You

might think I'm crazy, Mina, but I'm far from it. I just found something so valuable that I'm ready to risk my life for it."

It was something I didn't have before I met Usato. All I'd ever done was live my days in desperation, ruled by the fear that I might be driven out of this place. My days had been empty and without a future. Then Usato showed me a path . . . He showed me hope.

And no matter how much I get chewed out, or how grueling the training gets, for that I will always be grateful. One day, I want to be a strong healer, just like Usato. I want to grow to the point that I can stand alongside him in the ranks of the Rescue Team.

"Are you talking about that ogre wearing the skin of a healer? You can't be serious. You want to be the same as *him*? It makes me so sad seeing a noble who longs to be a different species of creature entirely."

"Yeah, he's probably as strong as an ogre, that's for sure. But it doesn't matter how strong you are if you're a worthless human being. Wielding that kind of strength is just violence. Just like your burst magic."

"Oh really!"

Mina's eyes glowered, but it didn't matter—that kind of rage wasn't going to faze me after what I'd been through these last three days.

"I'm going to beat you and say goodbye to the person I used to be," I said. "And then I'll free myself from the cage that this place has become."

I had decided that when this match was over, and all my preparations were complete, I'd leave Luqvist for Llinger Kingdom. I didn't have any reason to stay, and it wasn't like I had any friends here. That said, even though I didn't know if we were friends or not, it really hurt me to think about parting with Kiriha and

her brother. And it hurt to think that I'd been unable to repay them for their kindness—they'd (somewhat awkwardly) taken me in, a human they had every reason to hate.

"You're going to free yourself? Without my permission? Funny joke, Nack. I was going to push you around a bit and call it a day, but I've changed my mind. Lucky for me, your dad told me I can do whatever I want."

Mina pointed her finger at me.

She continued, "I will hurt you until you cry and beg for mercy. When you are no better than a trampled and worn-out dishrag, I'll keep you as my slave for the rest of your life. Quite the honor, wouldn't you say?"

"Could you be any more selfish? Then again, I guess you always were . . ." I muttered.

If talking were an option, we wouldn't have been standing here facing off against one another. But I wasn't going to give up the rest of my life to slave for someone else. Wiling away the rest of my days in this place was an even worse fate.

I took a deep breath and focused. In response, Mina readied her giant silver shield and began to pour magic into her hand.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," I said.

"So you say now, my adorable little dishrag."

There was nothing more to say. It was time for me to show Usato everything I'd gained over the last five days.

“Burn!”

Mina unleashed her magic and I took off running. A scarlet ball flew from her palm: burst magic. It was a rare type among those with fire magic affinities. It was unique in that it exploded in an instant, searing the air and its target while also sending them flying.

Burst magic was a horrible matchup for me as a healer with no offensive abilities outside of hand-to-hand combat.

Then there was Mina’s shield. That was going to be a problem. At a guess, I assumed it wasn’t to protect against my attacks but rather to protect her from her own burst magic. It was a smart way to make up for the one weakness of her magic type. It was equally as dangerous to the caster as the target.

Those thoughts flashed through my mind as I kicked off the ground and jumped to the side. A few instants later, Mina’s fireball landed where I’d been standing and erupted into a small-scale explosion. I checked the size of the blast, then turned to Mina, who stared at me in shock.

“Nack . . .” she seethed.

“I haven’t just been playing around for the last week! You better give it everything!” I shouted.

“You will regret belittling me!” she seethed.

Mina unleashed another fireball.

She hadn’t been lying earlier. The fireball she cast was considerably bigger than any other she’d ever thrown at me. But it was way too slow. The magic bullets Usato threw moved at least twice as fast.

“You’re too slow!” I shouted.

I ran from corner to corner of the practice grounds, twisting my body and dodging the fireballs that Mina threw at me. I stood still and ducked under one. At the same time, I picked up a stone at my feet. Then I threw that stone at the next fireball Mina chucked, which was aimed at my legs.

The fireball collided with the stone and exploded before it hit its intended target. I leaped backward in time to avoid the blast.

“Your training wasn’t for nothing, Usato!” I cried.

I could feel the power in me as I wiped away the dust and dirt. I was filled with gratitude. I had always thought that healing magic was useless, and I never thought I could use it for others, so nothing made me happier than knowing it had become a source of power.

But even while I was trembling with gratitude, Mina was still throwing fireballs. Her vision was hampered by the dust and smoke, but Mina was still intent on pitching fireballs in all directions. My words must have really hit a nerve.

But I realized that this was my chance.

If Mina was firing haphazardly, it meant that she didn’t know where I was. On the other hand, because she was still casting her magic, I knew exactly where she was.

“Let’s do it!”

If one of those fireballs hit me directly, it was all over. I’d be knocked out because I still lacked physical durability. But if I didn’t try to get close to Mina, I’d never be able to take her down.

There was no choice but to go. I put my right palm on the ground and sent

power into my legs.

“Here I come!” I shouted.

I spotted Mina through the smoke and ran at her with everything I had. Running into her fireballs was suicide, but right now, she was firing too wildly. I kept my eyes on her even as the shock waves from nearby fireballs rocked me. Then I leaped into the air with a battle cry. I soared higher than my own height and burst through the dust cloud.

“Huh?” uttered Mina.

“Take this!”

“Wha?! You’re . . . flying?!”

The momentum carried me. I flew toward Mina and launched a kick right at the dumb, idiotic look on her face. Mina lifted up her shield desperately and hid behind my kick, but . . .

“You think that hunk of metal is going to stop me?!”

“No way!” uttered Mina.

She screamed as I spun into my kick, sending both her *and* her shield flying. I watched her slam into the ground as I landed. Then I wiped the dust from my clothes.

“I won’t back down anymore, Mina Lycia!” I shouted, pointing at her as she struggled to get back to her feet. “We’re going to put an end to things, right here, right now!”

This is my power.



This is the power of the healers you and your cronies made fun of!

She must have cut herself when she hit the ground because I saw blood dripping from the corner of Mina's mouth. Her shield seemed to have saved her from anything worse than that though. Still, in the center of her shield was a clean dent and a small fracture stretching along it.

Mina stood to her feet. A smile rose to her face that was more aggressive and bloodthirsty than any I'd ever seen.

"Ha! You asked for it!" she said. "Now you're really going to regret making me go all out!"

She leaned against her shield to help her stay on her feet and wiped the blood from her mouth. She glared at me through bloodshot eyes. They were fearsome, filled with a mix of murder and rage, but I didn't flinch away.

Now I would face off against a Mina I had never known.

*

"He's really gotten stronger," said senpai admiringly, watching the fight.

I looked around and saw that all the teacher-like people in the crowd were utterly dumbfounded. Their jaws were agape. This, of course, was only natural. It was because I'd re-created Rose's grueling training regimen.

Seeing my own disciple's growth in front of my eyes filled me with pride.

"Nack has gotten stronger because he trained hard," I said. "But his true

strength was in his ability to see the training through.”

I’d put him through something so grueling that even *my* heart hurt. Nonetheless, Nack made it through to the end of it.

“This is amazing for only five days of training,” said Kazuki, crossing his arms as he watched Nack dodging Mina’s attacks and zipping across the grounds. “Looks to me like if Mina takes another kick like that, she’ll be down for the count.”

“He really should have finished it with that blow,” I said.

Kazuki turned to me in surprise.

“Huh? Why?” he asked.

I kept my eyes on the match between Nack and Mina as I explained my own analysis of the fight so far.

“Mina has faster reactions than I expected, and Nack only has power in his legs. He doesn’t have punching power the way I do. So that kick we saw? You can think of that as the best that Nack’s got.”

That shield, too, was stronger than I thought. It also looked heavy, which meant there was a chance that Mina was physically stronger than Nack. It was unfortunate that Nack hadn’t been able to destroy it with his kick. Mina was no idiot. She wouldn’t let the same thing happen again.

“That, and Nack’s got practically zero durability. One good hit and it’ll be *him* down for the count. And it’s not like I can just go punching him to toughen him up, you know?”

“That’s because if you hit poor Nack-kun, you’d kill him!” said senpai.

I laughed it off, but . . . I *did* hit him with one or two light counters the day

before. I was sure to keep the hits healed, so we were all good there. Besides, Nack got up without issue anyway.

But if the others found out what I'd done, I just knew they'd be appalled, so . . . while I acted like everything was fine, I was kind of freaking out on the inside.

"Lying is bad, Usato," said Amako. "Very bad. You should admit to everything and accept your fate."

This little fox, I swear . . .

Out of sight of senpai and Kazuki, I readied my finger for another flick and watched as Amako covered her forehead, her face going pale. Then she pulled at my coat to hide her face.

Stop that. You'll stretch it!

"Anyway," I said. "Mina and Nack are both the same in that way—one clean hit is all it will take to decide the match. But Mina reacted in time to Nack's attack. She's more than just a bully."

"Among the kids her age, she's definitely at the top of the class," said Halpha. "She's a little overconfident, but as a mage, she leans on the tried and true. She'll put her shield and burst magic to good use. It's a rather bad matchup for Nack."

I looked out at Mina casting her spells, attacking with her burst magic, and defending with her shield. If Nack could break that shield, he'd turn the tide of battle in his favor. But there weren't many ways for him to do it.

"Nack's strategy is based entirely on evasion. He's at a disadvantage in some ways, but not in all of them. Over the last three days of training, he got the kind of training that would prepare him for a mage firing multiple projectiles."

And through that evasion, he could find an opening and exploit it with a

physical attack.

Nack had developed evasive movements for medium-distance and long-range attacks thanks to my healing bullets. I'd taken Rose's "Punching Bag Training" and modified it to create my own "Shooting Range Training." Thanks to that, ordinary projectiles weren't going to bother him.

Well, the projectiles themselves weren't going to bother him, but there was no way for him to avoid the shock wave damage from nearby explosions.

"Don't be careless, Nack," I whispered. "You might have gotten stronger, but you're still weak. One hit could put you in a bad spot."

He could heal a wound with his healing magic, but that didn't mean it wouldn't still hurt like hell.

Even the smallest miss could still prove fatal.

*

"Is running all you're good at?!" Mina shouted.

I never stopped moving as the fiery fireballs exploded around me. I looked for a chance to counter. Ever since I landed my surprise attack through the smokescreen of dust, Mina had changed up the density of her fireball attack. She had given up the wide area attack in favor of focusing on a smaller area, making it harder for me to get inside.

Not only that, but the fireballs that landed close showered me in an explosion of sand and rocks. So even though my legs threatened to give up on me, I never stopped moving.

“I can’t dodge everything,” I grunted as another shock wave sent rocks hurtling into my body.

The damage wasn’t enough to injure me, but the pain ate away at me mentally.

“I wish I could just fire off spells like an idiot!” I said.

“It’s called natural-born talent! It’s because I’m a prodigy!”

I guess I should have expected a comment like that from a princess who was easily top of her class. Mina was brimming with confidence. In her mind, she hadn’t even entertained the thought of losing. She was a genius. From the day she was born, she was expected to stand head and shoulders above those around her.

Me, I was a deadbeat, abandoned by my own family.

But that didn’t mean I was all out of options.

“I will . . . keep going!”

I had built up these legs through training, and I was going to run, and keep running, until Mina was entirely out of magic.

I dodged more fireballs and attempted to get closer.

“If I can just get . . . to close quarters . . .”

Because Mina’s magic was so explosive, if I got close enough to her, she’d be unable to use it for fear of hurting herself. That was exactly the weak point I was aiming for. If I could land just one strike—one good kick—taking the dainty Mina out of the fight would be all too easy.

I waited for her to hide behind her shield, then leaped to the right, where she was defenseless. I knew that she blocked her own line of sight when she hid

behind her shield, and that was where the match would be decided.

“Now!” I cried, throwing a kick.

But all I heard in response was a giggle.

In the next instant, I saw her grinning from behind the hand that held her shield. But she wasn’t just grinning. She had a firm line of sight on what I was doing.

I felt a chill run through me like nothing I’d ever known. Although I tried to stop my kick, the very moment that I took my focus off of Mina, I felt a huge shock run through my head with a crash. For a moment, my vision went black and I felt like I would collapse, but I gritted my teeth and stood my ground.

What the heck was that?!

I held my aching head in my hands and looked at Mina only to find a wall of silver rushing toward me with incredible force. I let out a shout of surprise, but my body refused to listen to the commands of my brain. Then Mina’s shield sent me flying through the air and crashing to the ground.

“Oh, you really *are* stupid, aren’t you?” she snarled.

Mina’s face was filled with a smile. She held her shield up and looked down at me writhing on the ground.

Did she swing her shield to attack me right as I was throwing my kick? That’s exactly what she did . . . Then she must have plowed into me with it after that.

“For me, shields aren’t just a means of defending myself,” Mina explained. “That trick usually only works the first time, but it still makes for a great response to sneak attacks.”

Mina hefted the shield back onto her arm with one easy movement. I must

have been cut because blood dripped from between my eyebrows. I tried to use my healing magic, but my vision was still wobbly from the hits and I couldn't concentrate. When I couldn't concentrate, my magic efficiency dropped considerably, and easy-to-heal wounds suddenly weren't so easy to heal.

I rose to my knees and glared at Mina.

"You think you can beat me just because you've got a quick set of legs and a good set of eyes?" said Mina. "Think again. A good mage fights with an understanding of their magical affinity. They think about how they match up with their opponent. I am a bad matchup for you, Nack. Why did you *ever* think you could beat me? You have to know that there are battles you can win and battles that you can't."

Battles you can win.

Battles that you can't.

Are you saying that I'll never beat you?!

You expect me to believe that?!

"But you do deserve *some* praise," said Mina. "You came a long way in a week, and you shocked me. Honestly, you did. So how about you just admit defeat right here and now and I'll make an exception and forgive you? You don't want to suffer any more than you already have, do you?"

I was shocked. Mina actually praised me. And . . . the words felt so incredibly sweet to my ears. If I gave up, maybe I'd be released. I thought . . . *maybe then things will be better than when I was being bullied.*

But my answer remained the same.

"No. Never."

Things will be better?

That was a pipe dream. It was true that Mina's compliment had given me something like a sense of achievement. She had looked down on me all this time, after all. But that was all it was. The power balance of our relationship would never change, and the days of being stuck under her thumb wouldn't either.

She was on top, and I was on the bottom—it was a relationship that could not be overthrown.

"I'm not going to give up," I said. "Not when I came out here to send you flying."

"Nobody's going to blame you for giving up now."

"Yeah, that's true . . ."

Usato, Kiriha, and Kyo were all good, kind people. They'd respect my decision. But I wouldn't.

I wouldn't forgive myself for giving up, and for taking the easy way out, and for this half-assed life of mine.

"If I give up here, maybe things really will get a little better than before," I said. "But if I give up right now, I will be a loser for the rest of my life. And more than that . . . I'll be throwing away everything I did with Usato over the last five days. And I will not allow that!"

"Is it really that important to you? It was just a week," Mina asked.

"Yeah, it was just a week! But I'll never be more grateful for what I got in those few days. I suffered and it hurt and I wanted to run away, but even then, I was happy!"

I didn't want to expect anything from anyone, and I didn't want anyone to expect anything from me. My parents abandoned me. I stopped being able to trust people. But the people around me helped me and trained me to the point that I could stand toe to toe with Mina here in this practice ground. They believed in me, in my victory, and that was more than enough reason for me to stand my ground and not give up.

"Ever since the day I woke to my healing magic, I lived a life in the depths of despair, but I learned to trust, and I learned to believe again!" I yelled. "So I will never give up! Not to the likes of you!"

"Ha! Big talk," replied Mina. "Has all the blood drained from your skull? Is that why you can say that? Look at yourself. Think about the situation you're in. How about *then* you think about what to say?"

"Don't forget, Mina. I'm a healer," I said, standing to my feet. "And this? This is nothing to me!"

My wounds were healed. All our talking provided the time I needed to fix myself. I wiped the blood from my forehead and flicked it to the ground.

I can still fight.

Mina looked at me with pity in her eyes.

"Fine. You leave me no choice. Let's do this," she said.

Mina's eyes flashed wide as she held her palm out toward me. In an instant, I leaped away from where I'd been standing. I would not eat the same attacks again.

"I will admit that you have gotten stronger," said Mina. "Stronger than I could have imagined. Your five days of training were not in vain."

Something's different about her.

Until now, she'd been letting her magic loose as if she were at the whim of her emotions. But now she was shockingly quiet as she channeled her magical power.

"I will change my strategy," said Mina.

"Huh?"

"I thought that if I cornered you, I could hit you and we'd be done. But that won't work on the person you've become. So like I said—a change in tactics."

Mina then stabbed her shield into the ground and created a new type of fireball. But this was not like the single fireballs she'd cast until now—instead, there were *five* small fireballs floating above the palm of her hand. I knew exactly what kind of attack was coming next, and I was covered in a cold sweat.

"I may not be capable of the monstrous feats of those heroes, but I *am* capable of this much. Even if I can't get a good bead on you, as long as I focus on where you're headed, I can unleash these fireballs in combination. No more running, Nack."

Mina had *ten* fireballs floating across both of her hands. She looked at me with a bold, wicked grin, then held her hands out. At the same time, I leaped away from where I'd been standing.

"You can run, but you can't escape!"

In the next instant, my body was assaulted by the successive shock waves of explosions around me.

Nack let out a cry of agony as the shock waves from Mina's fireballs rocked him. He was still running, but Mina was firing wave after wave across a wide area, and Nack couldn't avoid all of them.

"Usato! Will Nack be okay?!" asked Kazuki.

"Usato-kun . . ." murmured senpai.

"Mina's burst magic is quite powerful, and by spreading it across a wider area, she's restricting where Nack can run," Halpha explained. "It doesn't matter how fast he is—he's at a clear disadvantage. It doesn't look good . . ."

Halpha was exactly right. Nack's situation seemed hopeless.

"Usato, is he alright?" asked Amako.

She was still holding on tight to my coat, looking out at Nack with the same worry in her eyes as Kazuki and senpai.

Is he alright? Not in the slightest. And widespread burst magic? That's also not good. But so what? All that means is that there's nowhere safe to go anymore. It doesn't mean that Nack's all out of options.

"What's with that expression, Nack?" I muttered.

Gone was the brave face he'd worn earlier, replaced by terror as he ran. It was true that Mina was stronger than we'd all expected. And it was safe to call her a prodigy, too, given her sensitivity for magic and the magical power that allowed her to keep up her widespread burst magic attack.

But I had pointed Nack toward the Rescue Team. And when the Rescue Team was on the battlefield, there were no safe zones. There was nowhere to stop and take a break. It was a place where magic or blades could assault us at any moment, so the situation that Nack was in now? It was all in a day's work.

Nack, what's on your mind that's got you so desperate and panicked under Mina's fire? Are you just running? Are you looking for an opening? Are you waiting for her to tire?

It was all too obvious to me—ever since that one surprise attack Nack launched, he hadn't shown a single shred of drive to take Mina down.

"Quit playing around, Nack!" I uttered.

I didn't train you just to run away. I trained you to win.

"It's not like me, I know, but maybe I should offer him a word or two of support," I said.

No matter the circumstances, the Rescue Team did everything to accomplish its duty of saving people. I took a deep breath. Amako let go of my coat and covered her ears. Kazuki, senpai, and Halpha all looked on in surprise as I stood to my feet.

But I ignored them and readied myself.

*

The air was hot. Breathing it sent pain through my lungs.

But even then I refused to stop moving. The moment I stopped, I'd be hit directly with a burst magic attack, and I could say goodbye to consciousness. I couldn't stop. Even Mina had to have a limit to her magical power.

I just had to bear it. And bear it, and bear it, and bear it, until I made it through and took victory.

"I must say this look suits you, Nack!" said Mina.

The ground at my feet exploded and I let out a cry of pain as rocks came flying at me. I turned away to protect the right side of my body, but the wave of heat that followed sent me rolling across the floor with a groan.

“It’s who you are, Nack,” she kept taunting.

Mina’s voice came to me in pieces. I couldn’t make it out clearly. But I knew one thing for sure: it was different from usual. I couldn’t hear any emotion in it.

“On and on,” she said. “It goes on and on and on with you. Always pathetic! Always pitiful! This is what’s wrong with you!”

But I couldn’t let myself stop. I used the momentum of my roll to bounce back to my feet and make room just as I was blasted by another wave of heat. I covered my face with my arms and leaped backward, then ran. I barely had time to heal, so I had to keep healing at a bare minimum while I focused on dodging and weaving.

“I am going to make it so that you will never get back up again. I am going to make it so that you never think of doing something as stupid as leaving this place! Never!” she shouted.

I wouldn’t let myself listen to her. I concentrated on the incoming fireballs, because if I didn’t, it was all over.

“I can still . . . hold on. I still . . . haven’t lost yet!” I grunted.

“All you can do is run! That you even think you can beat me is preposterous! Why don’t you understand?! Why do you simply accept it?! Why don’t you try to resist?! Why?!”

I couldn’t stand listening to her high-pitched shouts anymore.

“Shut up!” I shouted.

“Naaaaaaaaaack!”

A voice boomed inside of my head.

The voice was so powerful it stopped me. It stopped Mina . . . Heck, it stopped everyone in the entire practice grounds. Every single one of us turned to see Usato standing with his arms crossed.

“Usato . . .” I whispered through a rasp.

I knew in a flash that he was mad, and I feared whatever it was he was going to say next. I stood there, dumbfounded, as he stared at me.

“You idiot!” he bellowed. “No more running away! Fight!”

It was at once both a criticism and an encouragement, and it got straight to the point.

Mina couldn’t work out what was going on. She glanced back and forth between Usato and me. But I knew there wasn’t any special meaning in his words. They meant exactly what they said, and they were exactly what I had to hear.

I laughed.

“You must be out of your mind,” I muttered.

No more running away.

I had been so intent on taking Mina down at the start, but now all I could think about was fleeing in fear. She was giving this her everything—all that she had—and I wasn’t giving her the same thing in return.

“I really *am* an idiot,” I muttered.

I talked a big game, and then all I did was run around in circles. If I really decided to go for it, then no injury should stop me. At the same time, I hated

pain and I didn't want to lose. I didn't want to confront Mina head-on, so I ran.

I hadn't changed at all—I was still awkward, embarrassing, and a nobody.

"But . . ." I said, slapping my cheeks.

My eyes were now open. I was not going to run away again.

"Thank you!" I shouted.

I had a feeling that nobody in the crowd understood what Usato said. Not really. To them, he probably looked like the worst teacher in the entire world—a guy asking the impossible of a student with his back completely up against the wall.

But they were wrong.

Usato really understood me.

"What a ridiculous thing to say given the state you're in," said Mina.

"I know. He's the best, isn't he? He took my cowardly butt and he put it right back on track."

"I see . . . but don't make the mistake of thinking you can beat me, okay?"

Mina cast ten more fireballs in the palms of her hands. She was ready to fire them as soon as she wanted. Just a few moments ago, I would have fled in terror, but not anymore.

I took a deep breath, then covered my body in healing magic. Until this point, I'd kept the magic at a bare minimum, but now I was putting everything into it.

"You're going down," I said.

"Don't talk big if you can't back it up."

"Then enough talk. Let's end this."

I pressed my feet into the ground, then took off running. Not to dodge, and not to weave, but to take Mina down. It didn't matter what kind of burst magic she threw at me; I was ready to face her. I crossed my arms in front of my face to protect myself, let loose a battle cry, and charged ahead.

Burst magic exploded around me, sending rocks and dirt flying into my body, but my legs never stopped. The pain was nothing compared to the bullying that I had been through.

I felt waves of heat wash over me. My whole body felt like it was on fire, but it was nothing compared to the feeling of loss that came when my parents abandoned me.

Suddenly, before I even knew it, tears were flooding from my eyes.

“Nack, you . . . ?!”

Mina clicked her lips as she let loose one last fireball aimed directly at me. She had made it in a panic, but it was still powerful enough to render me unconscious. Ordinarily, my best bet was to dodge it. But I was a healer. No matter what adversity, and no matter how bad the conditions, I was a mage that would overcome my problems with my body alone!

I will endure any pain!

I cocked my right fist back as I ran.

“That shield is going down!” I roared.

Then I threw my fist at the fireball.

“What?!” cried Mina.

I was suddenly engulfed in flames. Searing pain ran through my body. It felt like my throat was on fire as I breathed. It was so overwhelming I couldn't even

scream, but I wasn't unconscious yet. I swiped the flames away with my hand and extinguished the burst magic.

In front of me was Mina, her eyes wide as she stood with her shield in front of her.

Finally, the time had come.

Finally, I was ready to face her.

And now that I was standing face to face with her, I knew . . . I was scared of her.

My legs felt like they would buckle at the next shiver, but I stamped down hard and kept moving. I couldn't lift my legs to kick anymore. My right arm hurt so bad I couldn't even move it. But I wasn't all out of options yet.

Even without the techniques I rely on, I still have my body! These legs will still run!

With a raspy shout, I kicked off the ground and ran toward the girl in front of me.

"What are you going to do with a body so beaten up?! Stop this! Do you want to die?!" Mina shouted at me.

Anyone watching would have assumed there was nothing more I could do. But if it were Usato in my place, he would have found a way forward no matter the circumstances. That's why I looked up to him.

And what I was doing now was my first huge step forward—a step toward becoming a member of the Rescue Team! I was going to slam into Mina, shield and all, with everything I had left!

"Geh?!" uttered Mina.

I slammed into the shield with enough force that I heard an awful sound come from my left shoulder where it hit, but I ignored it and kept pushing. Mina let out a cry of agony. I could hear how close she was. I shouted with all the emotion that ran through my body.

“I was scared of you! I never wanted to even look at you! Every time I saw you, I thought of the parents that used to love me! I used to remember the times when I was a noble!” I shouted.

Mina gasped, but I kept shouting, tears streaming down my face.

“But it ends here! Today! As of today! I am! The Rescue Team’s—”

It didn’t matter if I was only talking to myself. I still had to declare it—I still had to make it known that I was saying goodbye to the past that bound me—and to Mina too.

“—Healer!”

I pushed with everything I had at the crack running through a dent in Mina’s shield. Then, with a crack, the shield broke completely in two.

With nothing more blocking my way, I plowed straight into Mina with all the strength that I had left.

*

My first impression was that he was very gloomy for a noble kid.

His looks were nothing to write home about, and he didn’t speak clearly.

He was good for nothing, and I played with him.

His name was Nack.

He was the son of nobles with whom my parents were friends.

He didn't like playing outside, but I took him out anyway. It happened the same way every time. But it wasn't all that much fun. We had to stay on the manor grounds, and we couldn't go very far. Still, being together with Nack wasn't boring either.

When I thought about it now, playing with him might have been very important to me. Really valuable. I was the daughter of nobility, and there were so many freedoms that were kept from me in my everyday life. Nack mattered because he was the same. He was the son of nobility.

But when I turned nine, Nack vanished.

"There's no need for you to see him anymore," his mother told me.

"Why don't you play with our daughter instead?" said his father.

"They won't let me see my brother anymore," said Nack's sister with a sad look on her face.

I asked Nack's parents why he was gone, but they just looked disappointed. They didn't tell me anything.

After that, playing outside, which wasn't much fun to begin with, got so boring I thought I would die. Something important was missing, and the color drained from my life.

One year later, I went to Nack's manor with my parents. I happened to overhear a conversation amongst the Agares's family servants. They said that Nack had left to go to the Wizardry City of Luqvist. They said he'd enrolled in

the school there. Hearing that made me very happy for a very simple reason.

If I go to Luqvist, I can see Nack.

I already knew about Luqvist. It was a school where kids gathered from all across the lands to learn magic. I figured that had to be the reason that I hadn't seen Nack in a whole year—he'd been studying to make sure he could get in.

That night, I told my parents that I wanted to go to the Luqvist School of Magic. They were both worried about me, but I managed to convince them.

When I got to Luqvist, the first thing I did was look for Nack.

And I found him, but . . .

He was a completely different person from the boy I remembered. He'd always been gloomy, but his eyes were glazed over with a blank stare. He was walking, hunched over between joyous new students with his shoulders slumped.

"Nack!" I called out, grabbing his hand.

I asked him why he looked so down and out of it. I told him that he had guts moving to Luqvist without telling me a thing. Yeah, I probably sounded spiteful, but I wanted to hear his timid, nervous voice. It had been so long.

But instead, he shrieked.

Then I squealed.

Then he slapped my hand away, his face warping with fear and terror. Before I knew it, he'd run away and disappeared. All I could do was just stand there in shock, looking down at my hand, which was pulsing with pain. I was hit in the face by a sharp sense of loss.

I sent a letter to my father after that, and then I finally understood

everything. Nack had found out that his magical affinity was for healing magic. His parents didn't want the news getting out, so for a while, they locked him in his room. After that, they drove him out by enrolling him at Luqvist.

I was in shock. I didn't care that Nack had healing magic, but I couldn't stand that he'd refused to acknowledge me entirely. Still, I tried to find him and work out some way to cheer him up, but it never went very well. He would flinch away from me. He wouldn't look me in the eyes. The moment he saw me, he'd run away.

One day, my frustrations turned to anger because things weren't going the way I wanted. My anger turned into a need to inflict pain. At first, it wasn't much. But it didn't matter what I tried—Nack just closed his eyes and took it. When I hit him with magic, he didn't get angry, and he didn't say a thing.

Why are you just sitting there and taking it?

Why don't you try and do something?

If you just proved your worth as a healer, then maybe you could get your parents to take you back. Maybe they'd try to understand you.

Luqvist was *the* best place to learn magic. If he wanted to rebuild himself or become someone different, Luqvist was the place to do it. But Nack didn't even try. He thought it was impossible right from the start and he just gave up.

And that infuriated me.

All of a sudden, I was talking less with words and more with violence. That just became a part of my everyday life. I was giving up too. I thought that Nack would always be like that. I thought that maybe we'd never ever go back to being able to play together.

Why did this happen? It was never supposed to be like this. I just . . . I just

wanted to take Nack by the hand and take him back to those times when we played together.

*

I coughed. The world around me swirled. I couldn't breathe properly after the impact of being slammed on my back. My joints ached.

This was *my* match to win. The talent, the magical power—I was better at *everything*. Yeah, I looked down on Nack and underestimated him, but I didn't go easy on him either. I brought a shield with me. That wasn't a thing nobles did.

Defeat should have been impossible, but there I was, lying on the ground, moaning.

I didn't want to lose. I could feel that sensation bubbling up from the deepest part of my heart. It was the greedy part of me, and it wasn't like me at all.

"If I . . . lose . . ." I mumbled.

What? I'll lose my position at school? Nope. I couldn't care less what the other students think—always fawning and sucking up. Then what? My family's going to chew me out? I have never once feared that in my entire life.

I groaned and lifted my head. I saw Nack standing there, looking down at me, his shoulders heaving with each breath. He was in a worse state than I was and he didn't seem to be in the least bit happy about where we were either. In fact, tears were streaming down his face. He'd made me eat dirt—me, who he had spent so much time despising and hating—so I didn't know why he wasn't overjoyed.

“I’m not . . . done . . . yet . . .” I muttered.

If I lose, Nack leaves this place. And just like last time, he’ll abandon me to go somewhere else. I’ll never . . . let that happen.

“I won’t . . . let you go!”

It can’t end like this.

Through the remaining haze of my consciousness, I filled my right hand with magic and pointed it toward Nack.

*

I heaved with exhaustion. I had slammed into Mina with everything I had and sent her to the ground. I barely had any magic left within me and my whole body was wracked with pain.

“Is this . . . Did I . . . win?” I muttered.

I looked around through the haze of my vision, at the students who could not believe what they had just seen, and at Usato, who breathed a sigh of relief.

I did it. I won.

“I’m not . . . done . . . yet . . .” Mina gasped.

Mina lifted herself up. She was covered in dust and dirt, but there was a strange stubborn insistence in her eyes as she glared at me. Then she pointed a hand at me, filled with magic.

I tried to defend myself, but I didn’t have anything left. I sat down.

“I’m not going to lose to you . . .” Mina muttered. “I won’t . . . let you just

leave this place . . . !”

“Why?”

Why was Mina so stubborn, so insistent about me staying at Luqvist? Weren’t there other students besides me? I didn’t know why she was so obsessed with me. I felt paralyzed with fear.

“Nack-kun! Get away from her!” someone yelled.

“Halpha?”

I heard the shout and looked over. Halpha had gone pale. My thoughts were still a haze as I turned back to Mina, who was continuing to pour magic into her hand.

That looks just like what Usato was doing.

“Nack! She’s Mana Boosting! Wait right there! I’m coming over!”

“Huh?”

Mana Boosting.

*Halpha’s talking about a skill that only experienced mages can do. Mina’s doing **that**?*

But if both Halpha and Usato are worried about it, then it has to be pretty dangerous, right? Especially when it comes to someone like Mina, who wields burst magic. If her magic goes out of control, it won’t be just me in trouble. It’ll be everyone watching too.

“Have to . . . run . . .”

I knew that if I didn’t run, I’d get caught in the explosion and die. So I tried to get to my feet, but then I realized.

“No . . .”

This was no time to be thinking about running. Even if this place was filled with people who looked down on me, that was no reason not to save them. Running away now would make me unworthy of the Rescue Team.

“Nack?! Hurry up and get away from there!”

I glanced at the voice and saw Usato running over toward us. I then attempted to stand up again with a groan. My left shoulder was broken, so that arm was useless, and my right arm still hurt from the burns. I couldn't put much strength into it. All the same, I put what magic power I had left into my right arm. I then shouted at my trembling knees and stood up straight.

“I'll never let you go . . .” said Mina. “Never! I won't let you leave!”

There was too much magic building in her hand, which started to shred and tear. Blood flowed from the cuts that opened. I could see Mina crying at the pain, but even then, she still stubbornly insisted on beating me. I couldn't put words to the feelings that I had for her. Still, I clenched my fist.

I will save you, Mina. You and everyone here. I just have to do something about this mess you're making.

“I will . . . save you!”

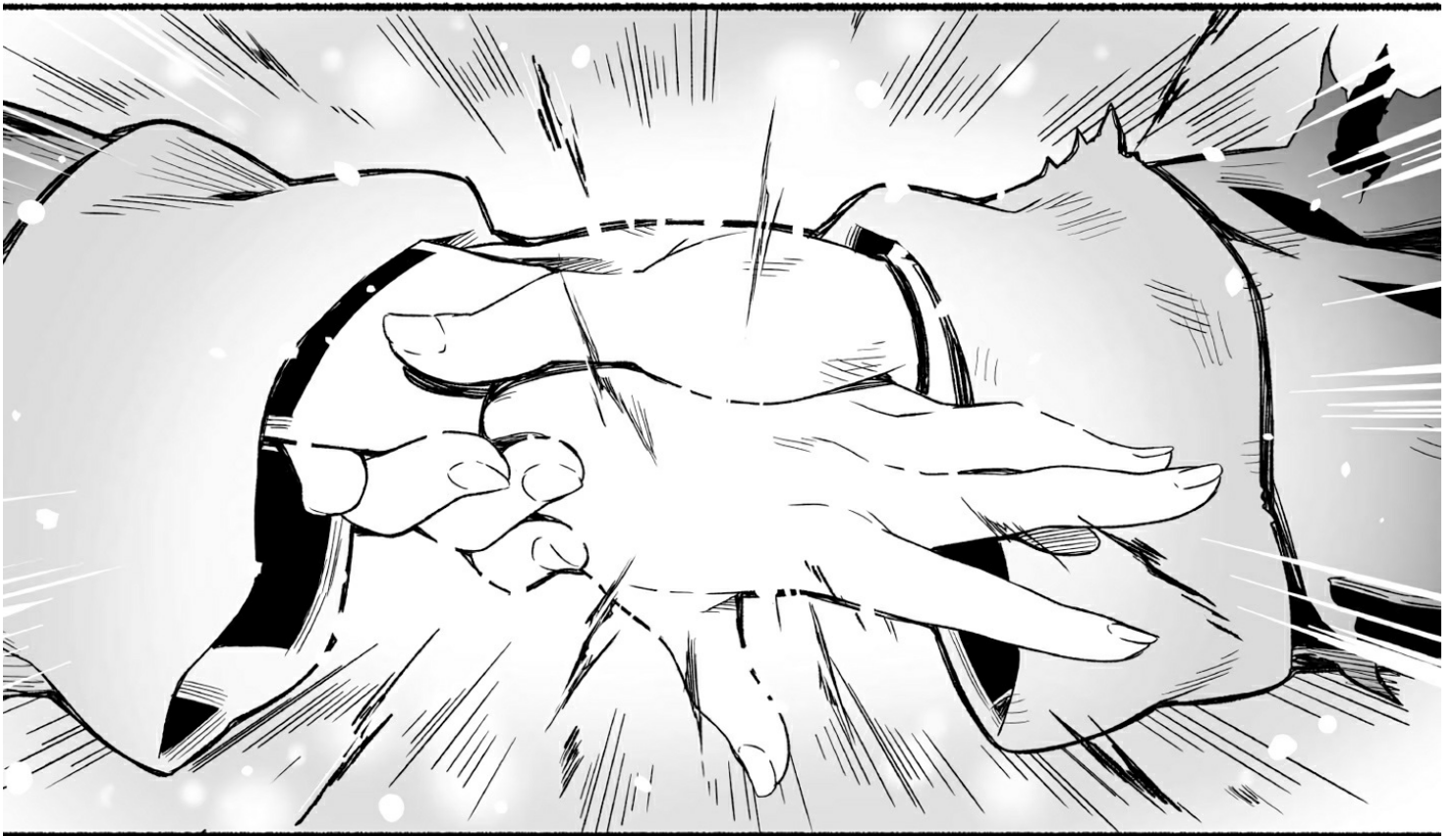
I walked up so we were facing one another. Our eyes locked.

“Nack . . .” Mina whispered.

With my eyes still locked on Mina's, I reached out with my weakened right hand and grabbed hers. Then I pulled her in close to me. I didn't have the strength to knock her unconscious. But what I could do was . . . minimize the scope of the burst magic explosion by shielding everyone with my own body.

“My hand . . .” Mina gasped.

I closed my eyes and readied myself for the pain that was to come, gripping Mina’s hand even tighter in my own. Then I felt a light spreading. I knew it even with my eyes closed. But whether it was Mina’s burst magic or something else, I did not know.



But the light was comforting, nostalgic, and gentle.

And with my eyes shut tight, I heard a voice trying to hold back from crying.

“It’s okay, Nack.”

I knew that voice. I felt a warm hand against my own trembling right hand. When I opened my eyes, I saw a relieved Usato next to me. Then there was Mina, one hand still in mine, the other pressed against her eyes as she cried.

“Mina . . . why are you . . . crying?” I asked.

“Sh-Shut up!” she spat through the tears.

I had suffered until now. Because of Mina, every day at Luqvist had been one of pain and misery. But to see her there in front of me, crying her eyes out, I . . .

“I’m sorry,” I uttered.

For some reason, I apologized. Mina shook my hand off. I must have been at the very peak of my physical abilities because I felt my body go weak as I fell forward.

“Whoa there,” said Usato, catching me before I could hit the floor. “Don’t force yourself. Just rest.”

Usato held me there as I felt a warm aura from his arms. He was healing me.

“Yep,” he muttered. “These injuries will heal up just fine.”

“Why didn’t Mina’s magic explode?” I asked.

She’d been building up her burst magic through Mana Boosting, after all. Usato looked a little befuddled by the question.

“Because she stopped it herself.”

“Huh?”

She stopped it herself? Mina did?

“It could be that . . . Well, she might just be kind of awkward with these things.”

“Awkward?”

I didn’t see her stop her magic spell. I didn’t know why she stopped casting it or why she was crying. In the end, I didn’t even know why she was so desperate to stop me from leaving.

But I couldn’t leave things like this. Things weren’t through between us yet.

“Still, you saved everyone, Nack. Be proud of that,” Usato said.

I was still mulling things over, but Usato’s words filled me with pride.

“Thanks,” I said, and though my voice was still feeble, there was confidence in it.

Usato nodded.

“Nack,” he said with a smile. “You’ve shown that you deserve a place among the Rescue Team. On top of that, your healing powers have returned to normal.”

“Huh?”

“Just look at Mina’s hand.”

She was still silently weeping with her head in her hands, but I couldn’t believe it—her wounds were . . . They were gone? All the damage that I’d inflicted on her in the fight, and all the damage she’d inflicted on herself

because of the Mana Boosting . . . it was like none of it had ever happened.

I looked over at Usato for answers.

“It wasn’t me,” he said. “By the time I got here, she was already healed. That means that you did it.”

“I . . . I healed her . . .”

“I don’t really understand the logic, but I think when you really decided you wanted to save someone, the ability came back to you.”

“The will to save others . . .” I muttered.

“That’s the most essential thing that all healers must have. And when it really came down to it, you found that feeling again. You cut yourself free from the chains of the past and found the will to save the person who had bullied you, along with everyone else here.”

I listened to Usato’s words and poured magic into my right hand. I was at my last reserves of magic power, so it was no more than a fingertip’s worth of healing magic, but it was still there, illuminating my fingertip in a green light. It struck me as so important, and so precious, and I clenched my fist around it as if to hold it close.

“It was always with me . . . but when times were at their hardest, I couldn’t think of anyone but myself,” I said, my voice breaking as I brought my fist to my forehead. “I felt so much pain I couldn’t spare a thought for another person. And so, without even realizing it, I hid it inside of me. But I finally got it back. And I’ll never let it go. I will never forget this feeling!”

Usato listened in silence, a smile rising to his face as he stood up with me still in his arms.

“After what you’ve been through, you’re capable of so much more than the

training you did yesterday,” he said. “I don’t doubt that the captain will be happy to make you a member of the Rescue Team. All in all, you did good, Nack. And . . . oh.”

“What?”

“Looks like there are some people who want to celebrate your victory.”

I wiped away my tears and looked ahead to where Usato had come from. Right there were all the people who had supported me over the last week, running over to me.

Chapter 7: The Start of a New Journey!

In the end, Nack was declared the victor in his match against Mina. Though there was something of a commotion around Mina forcing Mana Boosting into the proceedings, in the end, Nack's healing magic returned to normal. It was a sign that the deeper problems within him had been solved.

And though I would have liked to oversee some more of his progress before leaving Luqvist, the day after Nack and Mina's battle, Gladys called for me, Suzune, and Kazuki.

"Firstly, allow me the chance to say thank you," she said.

This was how Gladys opened things after we entered her office. She gave us a bow of thanks, to which I was utterly perplexed.

"Hm?" I uttered.

I looked to Kazuki and Suzune for support, but Welcie spoke first—she had a look on her face like she was in on it, anyway.

"The headmistress of the School of Magic, Gladys, wanted to see a fundamental change in the mindset of her students," Welcie explained.

I was still confused.

"In recent years, the school has seen an increase in students with a fixation on the idea that magic—and thus talent and skill—is something you are born with," explained Gladys.

Discrimination based on magical affinities—were kids so concerned about it that more and more of them were slacking off in their training?

"Students are giving up on improving their own abilities. They think that it all

comes down to talent, and that's not a good situation for us to be in. But you . . . No, you *and* Nack showed them all something different. Putting your . . . methods aside for a moment, Nack showed them all that he could stand up against the so-called wall of 'talent' and break it down through hard work. Seeing that is sure to change the minds and outlooks of a great many students."

I hadn't actually been aware of it, but it seemed like my actions had impacted the students of the city in some way.

"But all of you also changed the mindset of us teachers too. There is nobody who doubts your powers now," Gladys continued. "And if heroes as powerful as you suffered against the Demon Lord's army, then it is a threat to all of us."

"So . . . you mean to say that . . . ?" asked Welcie.

"Indeed," replied Gladys, looking at each of us. "Luqvist will support Llinger Kingdom."

Hearing the headmistress's words filled me with joy, and yet at the same time, I felt suddenly lonely at what those same words meant.

"We are so very grateful," said Welcie. "In that case, as of today, our party will . . ."

Now that we had our reply, we needed to set off on the next leg of our journey—it just hurt to think that I would have to say goodbye to Kiriha and the other friends I'd made since arriving in Luqvist.

*

We bid farewell to Gladys and left her office. Halpha saw us to the school's

entrance. Then we put the school behind us.

I took this as a chance to split from senpai and the others. I headed to Kiriha's house, where Amako was waiting for me. I knew that Nack was there too. He'd been exhausted after his battle with Mina and had been sleeping when I left.

I wasn't worried that I'd have to leave without saying goodbye, but . . . I trudged on until I arrived at Kiriha's house. They came out to see me. I told them all that I was leaving.

"Wow, so you're leaving today, then," said Kiriha.

"Yeah," I said apologetically. "Sorry it's so sudden."

"It's okay. It's an important mission, right?" said Kiriha, shrugging with a touch of disappointment. "You've got to see it through."

"Here," I said, passing over a cloth bag that Welcie had given me. "This is thanks for letting me stay here. Welcie wanted me to pass it along."

"We can't take this. We barely even did anything."

"That's not true at all. You helped us out so much—you gave Nack a bed, for one thing, and even more than that, I had a great time staying with you guys."

I wasn't making things up or trying to be polite. It was a bit wild, sure, but I really did have a great time.

Kiriha let out a defeated sigh.

"Well, I already know how stubborn you can be, so I may as well just give up and take it," she said.

"Thanks," I told her.

I couldn't leave without giving them something—they did feed me, after all.

“You really are a weird human, you know,” muttered Kiriha.

“Of course he is. That’s why he’s coming with me,” said Amako.

I didn’t know if I liked her tone though—was that really something you said with pride?

All the same, Kiriha giggled.

“Well, can’t argue with that.”

“Please, argue with it,” I pleaded.

“Why? Isn’t she right? And besides, that’s exactly why we were able to get to know you. It’s not a bad thing when you think about it, right?”

Kiriha grinned. She was lighter and more open than when we’d first met.

“I guess not, no,” I replied.

So much had happened. I felt it deep in my heart.

“I was pretty worried at first,” said Kyo, turning to face me, “but since we met, well . . . I feel like it might be worth trusting you humans again.”

“Kyo . . .”

“Now I’m not about to get all sentimental with the next human I meet, don’t get me wrong,” said Kyo with a pout. “I’m just talking about if we meet someone like you—someone who’s willing to just treat us like anyone else. Then maybe . . .”

Kyo then looked away, embarrassed. I couldn’t help but grin and chuckle at his words, which only made him go all red.

“D-Don’t laugh! I know how cheesy it sounds!”

“You really are a shy one, aren’t you?” said Amako.

“Shut up, Amako! I’m never going to say that ever again! Dammit, why’d I even say anything in the first place?!”

“Kyo, are you . . . crying?” I asked.

“Nobody’s crying!” he shouted, his voice enraged and yet trembling at the same time.

Kyo turned away from us in a sulk, so I apologized for teasing him. After I’d thanked them for their help, I felt glad that I’d come. Even putting my true objective aside, it was a valuable week.

“Nack,” I said finally, directing my voice to the boy who’d kept his head down this entire time. He didn’t say anything, or move, and Kiriha gave him a poke in the back.

“Come on, Nack,” she said. “I know how you feel, but at least give him a proper send-off.”

Nack let out a little moan, and then he looked up at me, his shoulders trembling as he found the strength to speak.

“Usato . . .” he cried, his face a mess of tears and snot.

I knelt down with a wry grin so I could look Nack in the eyes. I put my hands on his shoulders.

“Hey, there’s nothing to cry about,” I said. “It’s not like we’re saying goodbye forever, right?”

“But I can’t . . . I can’t ever thank you enough . . .”

“Nack, all I did was point you in the right direction. Your victory yesterday and your healing magic were earned with your own hands.”

In the end, I simply gave Nack what Rose gave me in terms of training. I

showed him the way to the Rescue Team. I really did no more than that.

Nack rubbed his eyes with his sleeves and clenched his little hands into fists.

“The training was really hard,” he said. “All the shouting was like needles in my heart. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever been through.”

“Okay . . .”

“At first, I thought, ‘Who is this crazy, insane person who would do these things?’”

“O-Okay . . .”

“And to be honest, at first, I thought it wasn’t healing magic at all—I thought you were a monster with terrifying magic at your disposal.”

“Alright, hang on a sec.”

What the . . . ? I really thought things were trending in the right direction for a second there. Is this a goodbye, or is Nack just chewing me out?

I kind of understood then how Rose must have felt about all of my complaining.

“But you had a reason for all of it,” said Nack. “The hard training, the healing magic, everything you taught me—all of it was essential to beating Mina.”

There was confidence in his eyes as he looked up at me with his piercing gaze.

“I want to be even stronger,” he said. “I want to be even stronger, like you. I found it, Usato—I found a life I want to chase where I’m not trapped by my family, or Mina, or anyone.”

Nack’s victory had freed him from everything that tied him down until now. And with that, he’d found himself the chance to walk a new path. What he did with that path, whether he walked it or he abandoned it, was entirely up to

him. He could make his own choices now.

Still, it was kind of embarrassing to hear him say that he wanted to be like me.

“I’m going to go to Llinger Kingdom and join the Rescue Team! I’m going to endure even harder training! And I’ll take any abuse! Any curses!”

“I’m still just a rookie in the Rescue Team myself,” I said. “To be honest, I’m a long way from being on the same level as the captain. Knowing that, do you still want to be like me?”

“You’re my teacher . . . so you’re the person I look up to!”

“I see.”

Seeing Nack grow so much filled me with joy. I put a hand on his head.

“You remember what I told you? About training and how it’s not about trying your best?”

“Yep!”

“Well, I’m going to use those words now, but I mean them as encouragement. I mean them for your future.”

Nack looked down at his feet bashfully. And to be honest, I felt a little of that too. But Nack was going to walk his own path now, and I wanted him to know I was behind him.

“Do your best, Nack,” I said. “The Rescue Team training is going to be unlike anything you’ve ever known. It’s going to be real tough, but I’m sure you can do it.”

“Bring it!”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“That’s the spirit,” I said.

I ruffled his hair with my hand, then reached into my coat pocket and brought out an envelope, which I passed to Nack. Inside of it was a letter. On the back of the envelope was some messy script that read, *To the captain*.

“Is this . . .”

“Yep, it’s a letter of introduction for the Rescue Team. This’ll get you through the door,” I said.

It wasn’t easy for me to learn the letters of this language, but somehow, I managed to get this letter done.

That said, I almost didn’t—I got it finished *just* in time.

“The captain is the one wearing this sort of jacket. She has the aura of a carnivorous beast, so you can’t miss her.”

“Got it! Thank you so much!”

Nack took the letter in his hands as if it were made of fragile glass. I had a feeling he’d do great under the captain’s tutelage. I didn’t know why I thought that, but I was sure of it all the same.

“Anyway, we should get going,” I announced.

Inukami-senpai, Kazuki, and all the others were waiting for me. I gave Amako a nudge, and she nodded. Then she took a little breath and looked up at Kiriha.

“I’m glad I could see you and Kyo again. Thanks for everything.”



“I’m glad we got to see you looking so well too,” said Kiriha. “If you ever get lonely, we’re always here, and you’re always welcome.”

“Thanks.”

Amako broke into a smile. She looked down as if she was a bit embarrassed by the joy of it.

Just like in Llinger Kingdom, you’ve got another place you can call home.

“That’s really great,” I whispered to her, then turned once more to Kiriha, Kyo, and Nack. “Kiriha, Kyo—keep well, you two. Nack . . . well, we don’t need to say goodbye, so how about we part with something more like . . . see you soon?”

“Make sure you come back and visit if you’re ever around these parts,” said Kiriha. “And give our best to Suzune and Kazuki.”

“Make sure to heal Amako’s mother back to full health!” said Kyo.

“I’ll be waiting for you at Llinger Kingdom!” said Nack.

It was sad to part ways, but it wasn’t like we’d never meet again.

And with that, Amako and I left.

*

“They’re really gone,” muttered Nack.

“That they are,” said Kyo.

The week had gone by in the blink of an eye, but for me, it had been an

experience unlike any other, and it was incredibly meaningful. I remembered the feelings that I'd forgotten of wanting to be friends with humans. And for the first time in my life, I'd done it—I'd made friends with a human.

"Hey, Nack," said Kyo. "Are you leaving for Llinger Kingdom right away?"

Nack looked a little troubled.

"I really wish I could," he replied, "but I still have some things to do."

Like what?

I turned to look at Nack and watched as he carefully put the envelope Usato gave him in his pocket.

"I have to send a letter to my parents to break things off," said Nack, a little reluctantly, "and then I have to quit school. That, and . . . I'm thinking I should see Mina one more time before I go."

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Nack," I said.

"Yeah, there's no telling what she'll do," added Kyo.

After the way the match went yesterday, it seemed way too dangerous. It wouldn't be at all surprising if Mina started casting attack spells the moment she saw him. But Nack simply scratched the back of his head.

"I know she could do anything," he said, aware of the danger, "and what she did to me isn't something that's easy to just forgive and forget. But putting forgiveness aside, I . . ."

"You . . . ?"

"I . . . just want to talk to her."

The only one who really saw Mina up close at the end of the fight was Nack and Nack alone. Nobody else who was there saw her face or heard her voice.

But with my beastkin ears, I felt like I heard something from her that wasn't brimming with confidence. What I heard was a clinging to something. It sounded like she was calling out to something before it left for somewhere far away. When I thought about that, I could see where Nack was coming from.

"You should do what you think is best, Nack. Just make sure you drop by again before you leave Luqvist, okay? We at least want to give you a proper send-off," I told him.

"Of course. You and Kyo are the only people here that I'm even remotely close to."

"I know this is me, a beastkin, saying this," said Kyo, "but it's a bit weird for you to go saying something like that with so much pride."

Good point. But after everything we'd been through, we now talked to Nack like we would talk to each other. At first, we mostly went through Usato to communicate, but at some point, we just grew comfortable enough to converse ourselves.

"Well, if it's weird, then it's weird, and that's the way it is. I *am* Usato's disciple, after all," said Nack with a cheeky grin.

"Ha! Well put," said Kyo, giving him a pat on the back.

I couldn't help but smile at the sight of it. That is, until the appearance of a young girl broke the relaxed atmosphere between us.

"So this is where you've been," she said.

It was Mina. She'd come from a different street than the one that Usato and Amako had taken to leave, and she looked at the three of us.

"Come with me," she said to Nack. "We have to talk."

Then she turned and walked away.

“What are you going to do, Nack?” I asked.

“Might be a trap, you know?” added Kyo. “Want me to go with you?”

There was something different about her, but it was still Mina we were talking about. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had set a trap for Nack as revenge. I heard Nack gulp nervously, but then he took a few cautious steps forward.

“No, you don’t have to worry,” he said. “It’s fine. I was going to save her until last, but I guess I’ll just talk to her now. I’ll be fine.”

He still looked nervous, but I could tell that talking to Mina was a big deal for Nack. If that was the case, we weren’t about to get in his way.

“Got it,” I said. “But if you get in trouble, you run, okay?”

“Okay. See you later!”

“Stay safe.”

We watched as the jittery Nack took off after Mina.

“You think he’ll be okay?” asked Kyo.

“I’m sure of it. He’s much stronger than we think.”

Kyo chuckled.

“True, true.”

I had been worried about whether it was possible for humans and beastkin to get along. But it struck me after talking with Nack that it really was a simple thing. I owed that realization to the work of Usato and Amako.

I really couldn’t thank them enough.

I blinked at the sudden rush of emotion swelling within me, then pushed it

down and secretly wiped away the tears I felt in my eyes. I looked back in the direction that Usato and Amako had gone.

I wasn't sure when I'd see them again. But at the same time, I didn't think it was the last time we'd cross paths. Amako had Usato, and Usato had Amako—and I felt that as long as they had each other, there was nothing to worry about.

"I can't wait to see you guys again," I muttered with a giggle.

When we next met, Amako's mother would be healed, Usato's journey would be over, and perhaps . . . I'd be a little more honest with myself than I once was.

And until that time came, I'd try living a life that was a little different to the one I'd lived until now.

*

Mina came looking for me.

I had intended to talk with her before I left Luqvist, but I'd never imagined that she'd come looking for me first. I acted like I was unfazed in front of Kiriha and Kyo, but to be honest, I was scared. I was watching Mina's back as she walked in front of me. I couldn't help worrying that she would turn around at any second and unleash burst magic on me.

"This is far enough," she said finally, coming to a stop.

I lifted my head and realized something: we were at the square where Mina always bullied me and the place where I first met Usato.

"Why here?" I asked.

"No reason, really. It's just a good place to talk in private."

Mina walked to the center of the square, then spun to face me. It didn't look like she wanted a fight.

"Um, where are all your . . . y'know, groupies?" I started.

Mina always had a gang with her, but they were all gone.

"Huh? My groupies? Oh, *them*. They stopped coming near me the moment I lost to you. I don't care though—they were always just following me around and getting in my way."

In other words, they'd abandoned her. Mina didn't seem to care though.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Are your injuries okay?"

Mina looked frustrated and she put a palm to her forehead.

Is it weird that I'm asking her about her injuries when I gave them to her?

Mina let out a sigh.

"Ever since I can remember, you've always avoided being clear about things. And you're kind of dim-witted. On top of that, you're so plain and boring. On top of *that*, you even care about your bully. I always knew you were an idiot."

I groaned. She'd hit all my weak points.

"Anyway, thanks to some idiot healing me," said Mina, looking away from me, "I don't have any injuries."

I was shocked. I wasn't used to Mina being so resigned and open. I wondered if she had head trauma from when I rammed into her.

But that just means she'll answer any question I throw at her. Time to find out

why she was crying yesterday.

“Um, why were you crying?” I started.

“Forget that.”

“What?”

Mina quickly cast a fireball that hovered in her hand and she glared at me.

“You forget that, or I blow you away,” she said.

“Got it! Consider it forgotten!”

Mina’s red cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and glare terrified me.

She’s still the same old Mina.

Mina let her fireball dissipate and calmed herself. Then she straightened her robe as if nothing had happened.

“I’m the one asking the questions,” she said. “Are you really giving up your noble rank?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve decided.”

“Outside of me, nobody’s going to try to stop you. You know that, right? Your father and mother have, as hard as it is to admit, already abandoned you.”

“I know that . . .”

When I heard that my dad told Mina she could do whatever she wanted to me, I knew that he didn’t think of me as his son anymore.

“I still remember what they used to be like, back when they were kind,” I said. “But I don’t think they’ll ever hold those feelings for me again.”

“Yeah . . .”

“Mina, I don’t know why you’re so intent on stopping me, but it’s too late. I’m

a healer, and none of them will ever recognize me as one of their own because of that. Even if I graduated from this place, they wouldn't take me back."

It wasn't common for someone to willingly relinquish their noble status. But I had a goal now, and I didn't need that status to get there.

"I know. And I'll let you leave Luqvist," said Mina.

What do you mean "let me" . . . ?

But Mina was always going to be Mina. Still, I preferred her like this to looking meek and cowardly.

"But I'm not going to give up," she said.

"What?"

"Don't look at me like that. You thought you could get rid of me just by winning a single fight?"

I froze. Just when I thought that she *had* given up, she went and said *that*. It wasn't like the battle broke off my connection to her, but I didn't think she'd react to the loss in this way.

"Wait a sec. I still haven't forgotten," I said. "You bullied me for a full two years!"

"That's because you're always so indecisive and wishy-washy. But it's not like I want you to forgive me."

I felt so panicked I wanted to run to Usato to beg for his help.

Usato! Help! This girl is so stubborn and overwhelmingly selfish I can't even talk to her!

"Why are you so scared?" Mina asked. "I said I wouldn't give up, but I didn't mean right now."

“Huh? Does that mean you won’t try and force me to stay?”

“Jeez, Nack. Why would I go and embarrass myself all over again? Didn’t you declare to me that you were leaving when we fought?”

“Well, yeah, but . . .”

“I can’t stop you from joining that weirdo Rescue Team or whatever it is. So I’m going to keep getting stronger while I’m here, and then I’m going to head out there and bring you back.”

Mina was talking about after she graduated. That meant she wouldn’t go to Llinger Kingdom for some years yet.

“When you say get stronger . . . does that mean you’re actually going to try?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“Er, no . . .”

Mina had the talent, and she had a knack for magic. Now she was actually going to start trying. If she combined hard work with what she already had, the sky was the limit for her.

“But now that I lost to a healer of *your* level, I realized that I’m still not strong enough by a long shot.”

She lost, and yet somehow she *still* sounded arrogant. But she’d said her piece, so she turned to leave.

“Let me ask you one thing,” I said, stopping her.

“What?”

“Why do you keep bothering with me?”

If I was being honest, I would have figured that Mina would be sick to death of

even seeing my face. But instead, she came looking for me.

What am I to you, Mina?

“I got mad because you just decided to disappear without saying a word. That’s why.”

She didn’t turn to look back at me.

I disappeared without saying a word.

That didn’t seem like the whole reason to me, but her words reminded me of something Usato said.

“It could be that . . . Well, she might just be kind of awkward with these things.”

The word “awkward” wasn’t a cover-all reason to just forgive and forget. There was no getting around the rock-hard fact that Mina had bullied me. I couldn’t act like that never happened, but I could face her now, and look her in the eyes, and stand on equal ground.

“Hey! Mina!” I called out. She didn’t turn to face me, but she stopped to listen as I took a deep breath and shouted, “I’ll be waiting for you at Llinger!”

Mina giggled.

“You’ve got guts,” she said. “You just wait. I’m going to get so strong you’ll go down in a single strike!”

Her shoulders shook and her voice cracked as she spoke, and then she ran off. I watched her disappear into the distance, and then I sat down on the ground and laughed.

“What in the world am I doing . . .” I muttered.

Calling out to Mina like that was like tightening a noose around my own neck,

but funnily enough, I didn't regret it. I had spent all my time until now avoiding reality. I said it wasn't my fault. I kept wondering why it was me that had to go through this. I felt like it was only me who was suffering, and I never once thought of anyone outside of myself.

"Thank you, Usato," I said.

Because of Usato, I found the power to stand up for myself, to confront who I was and to confront Mina after two long years. There was still some part of me that feared her, but I would accept those feelings as I moved on into the future. My life from here on out was sure to be filled with ups and downs the likes of which I couldn't even imagine. But I knew for sure that I wouldn't regret any of it.

I knew that because it was the path Usato showed me.

It was the path I chose for myself.

And there was nothing about that to regret.

*

After saying our farewell to Kiriha, Kyo, and Nack, Amako and I headed to the Luqvist gates. Everyone was waiting for us when we got there—Inukami-senpai, Kazuki, Welcie, and the knights. From there, we would split into three groups, together with our respective protection. Amako and I would be traveling together with Aruku, who had a horse for carrying our luggage.

"Aruku, that horse . . ." I said.

"We've got a bit to carry in the way of baggage, so I thought a horse would

help us out. A bit old, but a good steed all the same. And smart—we've got ourselves a good companion for our journey," he said.

"Is that so . . . Nice to meet you," I said, patting the dark brown horse.

The horse neighed comfortably in reply. I'd never touched a horse before, but this one was silky smooth. A bit different to what I was used to with Blurin.

Well, can't leave all the preparations to Aruku.

"Let me help," I said.

"No, no, I'm fine. Anyway, Welcie said she had something to talk to you about before we all depart, so by all means, see to that first."

I wonder what that could be? Guess I'll go find out.

"Got it. Amako, could you bring Blurin over? I imagine he's still sleeping," I asked.

"Okay."

I left the preparations with Aruku and headed over to the carriage where Welcie was.

"Sorry I'm late," I said.

"We haven't been waiting all that long," replied Inukami-senpai. "Did you say your goodbyes?"

"Yep."

"Right. Feeling a little sad?"

"I'll see them again when we've finished our work."

It wasn't a last goodbye. I'd see Nack in Llinger soon enough, and Kiriha and Kyo were practically our neighbors. My job now was to safely pass out the

kingdom's letters so I could see them all again.

"Looks like you're all here, then," said Welcie.

"Present," said Inukami-senpai, Kazuki, and I in unison.

"I know you all experienced quite a lot on our stop here in Luqvist, but keep in mind that this is just the start of your journey. Suzune, you're heading north—Kazuki, west, and Usato, east. This is the beginning of a long journey for each of you."

All three of us stood silently, listening carefully to each word Welcie spoke.

"I wish we weren't so helpless, but the truth is all of us at Llinger Kingdom—no, this whole continent—are leaning on you to spread word of the crisis that looms in the distance. And yet, none of you have asked for a thing—all of you are doing your best to help . . ."

Welcie's words faded into silence. It was clear that she struggled with the idea that so much was riding on our shoulders. She took a deep breath, then looked at us with a gentle smile.

"Suzune-sama, Kazuki-sama, Usato-sama, be well on your journeys. I will be praying for your safe return to Llinger Kingdom."

"We'll be back alright," said Inukami-senpai. "Kazuki and I are heroes, and Usato is an invincible member of the Rescue Team!"

"Uh, I'm not invincible though," I said.

Kazuki took a step forward and looked Welcie in the eyes. He was brimming with confidence.

"Llinger Kingdom is the one place in this world that we all call home," he said. "We've all got people waiting for us, so please don't worry. We'll see our duties

through and make it home safe!”

Welcie’s eyes welled with tears.

“Wonderful. Everyone, please, be safe,” she said, bowing once before leaving.

The three of us watched her go, then looked at one another.

“Senpai, Kazuki,” I said. “I know it won’t be easy, but good luck out there.”

“Hey, don’t steal my line,” said Kazuki. “You’ve got the toughest journey out of all of us.”

“Yeah,” added senpai. “You’re the one who has to go to the Beastlands.”

I knew it was going to be tough, but I’d made up my mind. And thanks to the interactions I’d had with Kiriha and Kyo, I could think about it now with more optimism. Yeah, maybe I was a bit too happy-go-lucky about it all, but I figured I’d make it all work.

“It’ll all work out,” I said. “After all, I made things work with Kiriha and Kyo.”

“It’ll all work out?” Senpai sighed. “Sometimes I really can’t tell if you’re conscientious or careless. Be careful, okay? If you find yourself in danger, I’ll come running, no matter where I am.”

Coming from senpai, it didn’t sound like a joke—I wasn’t sure how to respond. Kazuki laughed.

“That makes two of us,” he said.

“You too, Kazuki?”

“Of course. It’s what friends do. They help each other out of tough spots. Just like when you saved us in the battle against the Demon Lord’s army.”

“Can’t argue with you when you put it like that.”

Senpai giggled.

“You saved our lives, Usato. Of course, we want to help you whenever we can.”

Man, these guys are putting way too much into their feelings of gratitude.

Still, it made me happy to hear them say they’d help me out if I needed it.

“Anyway, enough with the sad goodbyes, yeah?”

“Good call. Let’s see each other off with a smile!”

We looked at one another, all of us wishing each other success on our travels and a safe reunion afterward.

“I’m not going to say goodbye,” said Inukami-senpai. “Usato-kun, Kazuki-kun—see you when we all get back.”

“Got it!”

Inukami-senpai’s smile was filled with confidence, while Kazuki’s reflected his kindness and generosity. I couldn’t help but smile myself.

I, too, hoped that we’d all get to catch up upon our safe returns.

*

“Usato-kun!”

“Senpai?”

We were all preparing to go our own ways when senpai called out to me. I glanced at Kazuki, who grinned before walking off toward the knights he would be traveling with.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I wanted to give something to you.”

Senpai walked up to me with something of a nervous look on her face.

Oh no, is she going to do that thing where she does something weird?

I prepared myself for the worst, but senpai simply took my right hand in hers. She ignored the surprise on my face and put an object in the palm of my hand.

“S-Senpai?” I asked.

“I’m certain that these journeys are going to be tougher than any of us can imagine. It’ll be at least a month before we’re done, and we’ll all face difficulties.”

She wrapped my hand in both of hers and squeezed it gently, then let it go. In my hand was a small cloth bag with something inside of it. I’d seen these a lot back in our homeworld. I bashfully scratched my cheek as I looked at senpai.

“Is this . . . an Omamori?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what it is. I made it here.”

In the middle of the rough-cloth fabric, she’d stitched the kanji symbol for “protect.” I felt emotions swelling within me.

“It’s really well made,” I said.

“Nothing worth praising. Of course, I gave one to Kazuki already, but I wanted you to have one too—it just worked out that this was the best timing to give it to you.”

Oh no, what do I do? I think I’m going to cry.

“Usato-kun?”

I'd felt similar feelings when I was talking to Kiriha and the others, but to be given something this nice—I was moved so much I was close to tears. I was so impressed by the gesture that I was trembling, and as senpai stole glances at me, I gripped her by the shoulders.

“Senpai . . .” I said.

“Huh? W-What? U-Usato-kun?! I-It's a little too early f-for that kind of thing . . .”

Senpai must have been shocked at being touched so suddenly because she went all red and looked down as she muttered. Still, I did my best to ignore it and say my piece.

“This Omamori means a lot to me,” I said. “I promise you, I'll make it home safe, no matter what!”

“He's just holding your shoulders. That's all he's doing, you know,” senpai began. “I know. I really do. Calm down, Suzune. Cool it . . . You're *not* freaking out from nerves right now!”

I tilted my head quizzically at first—it took a moment for me to realize that senpai was muttering in a low voice to herself because I had my hands on her shoulders, so I quickly let them go. Senpai then cleared her throat and collected herself. She pointed to the Omamori in my hand.

“Kazuki and I both carry the same Omamori. I made them by hand, so there's no special benefits to it, but I hope it will help you remember us if times get tough.”

“I sure hope there aren't any times like that though . . .”

If I was being honest, I hoped that everything would go off without a hitch. But all the same, having something like this in my possession . . . It made me

feel closer to Inukami-senpai.

“Usato-kun,” she said. “I have to start preparing for my own departure.”

“Got it. Good luck, senpai.”

“You too, Usato-kun . . . See you soon.”

She seemed to hesitate for a moment as she looked at me. She then turned away suddenly and walked toward the knights she was traveling with.

“Thanks.”

For a moment, senpai turned back to me, and I caught the tiniest glimpse of a tear running down the side of her face.



I pretended not to notice and tucked the charm she gave me into the inside pocket of my coat. Then I headed back to Aruku—who was finishing up with our luggage—and Amako.

“Usato, you ready?” asked Amako.

“Yep. There’s nothing more that needs to be said. Aruku, how are we looking?” I asked.

“Ready to go,” he said, pulling on the reins of the horse strapped with our luggage.

Senpai and Kazuki were traveling with groups of knights, but in my case, it was just me, Aruku, Amako, Blurin, and our new horse. But no matter how fast we traveled, this traveling group was just the right size for me.

With our preparations complete, we headed to the Luqvist gates and met once more with senpai and Kazuki’s traveling parties, at which point the gates slowly opened.

I watched the other groups head off in their separate directions, then turned to look behind me. I saw Aruku, Amako, and Blurin. I looked past them to the city of Luqvist. It was a short time filled with so much. My time with it had come to an end. Kazuki and senpai were heading off to new destinations, and my own new journey was about to begin. I won’t say I wasn’t a bit nervous about it.

But probably in part because of that feeling, I was also excited. I was excited to see the countries, people, and places outside of Llinger Kingdom. My heart leaped at the thought of the fantastical world that was waiting out there . . . though I should make it absolutely clear that I wasn’t nearly on the same level of excitement as Inukami-senpai.

“Well then, let’s head off!” I said.

And so, I took a bold step forward, off to our next destination.

Extra: What the Demon Lord Sees

The adventurers broke off onto separate paths. I could feel it from my throne, even though my castle was a long way from them. I opened my eyes.

“I will see no more than this,” I muttered, resting my back against the throne.

“Is there something you desire, my Lord?” asked the maid by my side.

“There is nothing I want in particular . . . and you do not have to be so formal.”

“For demons, your existence is absolute. Though you may allow one to be casual and at ease in your company, I cannot allow myself such a transgression.”

“On the other hand, it is a problem when my own importance is blown too far out of proportion. Conversation loses all its usual flavor.”

I let out a sigh and lifted myself from my throne.

“In any case,” I said. “It is better to have some company than none at all. Something interesting happened just now. Let’s talk about that, shall we?”

“You may use my ears as you so wish.”

“Did I not just use the word ‘talk’? I do not recall ordering you to listen.”

But the maid’s expression never broke. “Quite the personality,” I muttered somewhat sarcastically before talking about what I had just realized.

“Llinger Kingdom has its heroes on the move. Being that each hero is headed in a different direction, we can assume that they have left to ask for the support of neighboring nations.”

“Is this not a conversation best had with your military leaders, my Lord?”

“It is unnecessary. My intent was always to capture the greater continent. It does not matter how big a force they muster. Besides, my captains are all busy preparing for the next invasion.”

My army had been forced to retreat on two occasions and made to understand that Llinger Kingdom was not a nation we could simply walk all over. We needed to throw all of our power at it. As such, my forces were readying themselves—taking their time to grow stronger to ensure total victory.

“However, putting their heroes to use in this way is a most interesting tactic. It was worthwhile for us to make the first move.”

“My Lord, are you able to perfectly track the movements of the heroes?”

“No. I see them only vaguely. I know little more than where they are.”

This ability of mine was not as convenient as it appeared. Nonetheless, the maid was reverent.

“Amazing, my Lord,” she said with great respect.

It made me cringe.

“I knew that they were in the neighboring nation of Luqvist. But I do not know where they will go next. This is the limit of my powers—it’s little more than a simple trick.”

“If I, a mere servant, may be so bold as to ask, would there not be an opportunity at this present moment to attack Llinger Kingdom?”

“We have underestimated them enough already. Have you forgotten? The first time our invasion was pushed back, Llinger Kingdom still did not have its heroes. Moving our forces before they are fully marshaled will only result in

needless deaths.”

“My humble apologies. It was beyond inconsiderate of me. Please mete out whatever punishment you deem most appropriate.”

“Exactly how much of a tyrant do I appear to your eyes?”

Yes, there were stories of the unlimited terror and brutality I thrust upon the humans, but I was not one to neglect and bully my own race. And yet everyone seemed all too willing to thrust their heads into the guillotine of their own volition—it irked me. I put a hand to my forehead in frustration.

“Is there nobody with whom I can talk more easily?” I muttered, not looking at the maid. “I am not saying that you are unsuitable, but at this rate, I will quickly feel suffocated.”

“More easily? With all due respect, I am your chief servant—finding someone suitable will not be a simple task.”

“Why?”

“Because it was I who educated all those beneath me.”

“Oh. I see . . .”

In the back of my mind, I could easily imagine a line of maids, all of them with the same blank, expressionless face. No matter how many centuries passed, the demons refused to loosen up. It made me sigh—a rarity for one like myself. Then the maid raised her head as if an idea had come to her.

“A girl will be arriving soon, a new maid,” she said. “She is far from prepared, but I can bring her before you if you wish.”

“Do so, though I will not get my hopes up.”

Now that I had something worth looking forward to, I turned my thoughts

back to the heroes.

“However, they *are* interesting . . .” I muttered.

The two heroes of Llinger Kingdom were treated extremely well by the nation, and though nobody had forced them to do so, they risked their lives to stand against my own army.

But there was one more among them that was also intriguing.

“A healer . . .”

“A healer? I have heard it is a most troublesome magic, unique to humans.”

Before I had been sealed away, it was a magic highly valued among the human race. It was funny to think that now, however, it was looked down upon.

“Healers are now active on the battlefield. Back when I fought the last generation’s hero, such a healer did not exist. That is why healers are all the more intriguing.”

I maintained something of a slight interest in the healer who traveled together with the two heroes—I sensed that he traveled not just with humans but with a beastkin and a monster also. How could I not be intrigued?

“A human who is not a hero . . . Will he go the same route as *that one*?”

It was a memory from long ago—a human who teamed up with other races. A human that other humans could not believe was also human. A human who abandoned it all.

I could see their paths—that human and this healer—overlapping as if they were one.

The Wrong Way to Use Healing Magic Volume 3

(CHIYUMAHO NO MACHIGATTA TSUKAIKATA -SENJO O KAKERU
KAIHUKUYOIN-Vol.3) ©KUROKATA 2016

First published in Japan in 2016 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

ISBN: 978-1-64273-310-5

No part of this may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher. For information contact One Peace Books. Every effort has been made to accurately present the work presented herein. The publisher and authors regret unintentional inaccuracies or omissions, and do not assume responsibility for the accuracy of the translation in this book. Neither the publishers nor the artists and authors of the information presented in herein shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential or other damages.

Written by KUROKATA Art by KeG

Translated by Hengtee Lim English Edition Published by One Peace Books
2023

One Peace Books

43-32 22nd Street STE 204 Long Island City New York 11101

www.onepeacebooks.com